

StÃ³rmerki, Undur

by LJ9

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Summary: Merida and Hiccup help each other find a way home. The companion to "A Distant Star, A Burning Sun" (hence the same terrible summary).

## 1. Chapter 1

**\*\*Disclaimer:\*\*** These characters belong to Disney-Pixar, Dreamworks, and Cressida Cowell. If only I made money off of fanfiction.

What can I say, coming up with clever titles is not my thing. Points if you know from whence I stole this one.

This'll probably make more sense if you've read "A Distant Star," especially when it gets to the parts in Old Norse. I've come up with this in my defense, concerning all of the grammatical mistakes that doubtless exist in this story: When you just have to get where you're going as quickly as possible, grammar takes a backseat to vocabulary. Also, if you're wondering about succession and primogeniture in DunBroch in this story, my bottom line answer is: Disney.

Finally, thanks to everyone who reviewed or favorited "A Distant Star." I hope you like this one!

**\*\*Updated 31 March 2014: no new content, just better formatting.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>She'd been running since before daylight and now the sun was up, shining wanly. And this blasted hood wouldn't stay up. She'd always said that her hair would be the death of her; she just hadn't expected it to be true. They'd be able to see her from miles away unless she was able to keep her head covered.<p>

She paused to listen for something other than distant seabirds and the sougning of wind in the treetops. Just because you couldn't hear

or see the enemy didn't mean he wasn't there, her dad said; she heard no footsteps or telltale stillness, and there was nothing moving through the trees or creeping along the coast toward her. It would be safest to keep moving, she knew, especially unarmed and lost as she was, but the energy that had carried her from the camp in the dead of night was flagging. Here on the cliffs above the sea the wind blew straight through the cloak they'd given her. It was well into spring, but here, wherever she was, there were still mounds of snow on the ground. If she kept moving, she'd stay warm, and with luck she'd put more distance between herself and them. But she was tired, and cold, and hungry, and though she knew she shouldn't, she sat down. It was less of a sit and more of a slump, and she focused on what her mother would say: A princess must have proper posture. She does not let her tiredness show. She moves with grace and poise. Oh, Merida, do sit up straight.

"Sorry, Mum," she whispered, eyes slipping closed. "I just need a minute's rest, that's all."

The hood slipped off again.

\* \* \*

><p>She dreamed of fire. She dreamed someone was holding herâ€"someone too slight to be her father, too solid to be her mother, too gentle to be her kidnappers. Light flickered in front of her closed eyelids, orange-red, and she worried in her dream that she was on fire, that she should try to get away before she burned alive. Better to burn than freeze, though; better to take the risk and accept the consequences. She embraced the heat, wrapped it around her, let it comfort her while it could.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>As she woke from a good hard sleep Merida stretched, and then froze. Something was wrong. She'd been outsideâ€"she'd been running away. It had been morning and cold and grey. There'd been no roof, no fire dying on the hearth, no blanket tucked around her. For a second her heart soared with the idea that she was at home, or near enough, and she gasped and sat up quickly. Then her eyes adjusted to the light and she knew that she'd been wrong, though she couldn't say for certain why. Had her captors found her? Were any of them on guard now, or had they all gotten pished again and forgotten to set a watch? She couldn't count on that, not if they'd just retaken her; she'd have to assume someone was awake.<p>

Someone was awake, but it wasn't who she expected. Whoever it was spoke from across the room, hoarse and just quiet enough that she didn't hear what he said. He approached, still speaking quietly, and she pressed herself back, as far from him as she could get. The boy was about her age or a little younger; there hadn't been anyone so young or unscarred with the kidnappers. She wasn't taking any chances, though, no matter how nonthreatening he looked. When dropped his eyes from her, bending to pick something up, she moved on instinct, eager to put as much space as possible between them. "You can stay right there," she said as he stared in confusion. If they were going to talk, they could do it from a distance, with the couch between them. She didn't plan to talk, though. She'd seen the door, and if the boy meant her no harm he would let her go. One day, when she was safely back home, she'd find a way to repay him for his

hospitality. All he had to do now was let her creep toward the door.

He made no move to stop her, only watched curiously as she moved and then said something in a tone of mild warning. The words didn't make sense, but as long as she got out that door he could talk whatever nonsense he liked.

It served her right for not looking where she was going. Whatever she stumbled into and then fell on wasn't some piece of furniture or even a large dog; it was an animal, but with a leathery hide, a long tail, andâ€”surely those weren't \_wings\_? Caught off-guard she shrieked involuntarily, clapping her hands over her mouth as the creature raised its head, slitted eyes appearing in the darkness. \_There's no such thing\_, she told herself, backing away, but her self helpfully replied, \_And there's no such thing as mums who turn into bears, either\_.

At her shriek the boy had jumped over the couch with impressive agility for this time of night. He stood between her and the beast, leaning back against its head; it pushed its snout against his back but didn't attack. It reminded her of Angus when she was withholding his treat: demanding, but with the knowledge that he was much bigger and stronger and had to be gentle with her. Still, her hand dropped to her hip, for the small dagger that hadn't been there since she'd been captured. The boy spoke again, raising his hands between them, shielding her from the thingâ€”or maybe the other way around.

Was she supposed to believe that that thing was some kind of pet? She ignored the part of her that was intrigued by the idea and raised an only slightly trembling hand to point at it. "That's a dragon," she said, louder than she'd meant to.

The boy cocked his head, a slight frown on his face. He spoke again, and again it made no sense.

"Why don't you talk sense, or are you daft?" He glanced down at the dragon, like it might understand her better than he did. It stared back at her, eyes wide. It didn't \_look\_ like an animal about to attack. The boy turned his attention back to her and shrugged.

It was just so ridiculous all of a sudden, the kidnapping and the dragon and now this farcical inability to communicate, that Merida threw her hands up in frustration, rolling her eyes at the same time. He laughed and then blushed, as if he hadn't expected her to notice his laughter and was embarrassed when she did. He looked down, the laughter fading, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand, though he didn't have anything to be embarrassed about; she'd made more of a fool of herself plenty of times.

He stepped forward, looking hopeful. "Hiccup," he said, pointing into his own face. If that was his name, it was a bit of an odd one. He moved to one side, putting his hand on the dragon's nose, and added, "Toothless," before babbling something else. She pointed at each and said his name, enunciating in a way that would make her mother proud; apparently it was understandable enough, because Hiccup didn't correct her. Both of them gazed at her expectantly and she put one hand on her chest, stood up straight, and said, "Merida."

><p>She hadn't known before how far from DunBroch they'd sailed before the storm hit. It had been a week, or at least she thought so; they'd kept her hood up most of the time and even had her blindfolded some days. Merida had decided that they were either going to sell her as a slave in some far-off place or demand a ransom from her father. If it was the first, it would make sense to get as far from DunBroch as possible, but if it was the second the opposite was true. All hope she had of figuring out which option it was disappeared when the storm drove them off course. The place they'd landed to repair the boats wasn't familiar, but that didn't stop her from slipping away as they celebrated surviving the storm. Only a few of the kidnappers had ever talked to her, and she hadn't understood the others when they talked among themselves; it stood to reason that they could have landed in a place where the people spoke a different language.<p>

Even if the boy spoke the same language as the men who'd kidnapped her, that didn't make him bad. She had doubts about his intelligence as he turned his back on her and sat on the couch, giving her more than enough opportunity to escape, even with the dragon in the way. Maybe it wasn't stupidity, though; maybe it was a test. She weighed her options. If she remained here she would be warm and dry. The dragon hadn't tried to eat her yet, and if she had to be honest, she felt better now than she had since the last night she'd gotten to sleep in her own bed. If she left, there was no telling what she might find: a howling snowstorm, dangerous terrain, the kidnappers, more dragons. It couldn't hurt to stay until morning. They hadn't done anything to harm her yet, and she doubted that they'd start now. Besides, she wanted a better look at that dragon. She would stay, then, and in the morning she would find out where she was and how to get home.

She moved to stand at the far end of the couch, watching him. He wore a grey tunic and a pair of pants, nothing remarkable; but while one leg ended in a bare foot with toes stretched toward the fire, the other was made of interlocking pieces of metal, dully glinting in the light. Had he been born without it, or had it replaced flesh the way her dad's stump did? He leaned down to pick up a cup and the red in his rumpled hair glowed; with his face so near the light she saw faint stubble and freckles, at once grownup and boyish.

He was looking at her again, watching as she sat. From opposite ends of the couch they considered each other for a moment; before he broke the gaze she saw that his eyes were green, and homesickness hit her like a blow.

She hadn't let herself feel homesick before, nor sad, not while she was a captive and crying would have occupied eyes that should have been watching and noticing; a little fear was okay, anger better. But his eyes were the color of the summer yet to come in DunBroch, of the grass under Angus' feet and the leaves above her head, and all at once her stomach clenched. She missed her home, she missed her horse, she missed her brothers and her mum and her dad. Oh, he'd be going mad trying to find her. She had to get home before he and Mum worried themselves to death.

It would have been easy if the kidnappers had been as lax as Hiccup. He was no kind of guard at all, walking away again, making himself an easy target. If she had to she could put an arrow right there,

between the ribs; one in the neck if necessary, but it was a smaller target, easier to miss, especially in this light. He should have known not to turn his back on a stranger, though maybe he thought Toothless would protect him.

Maybe it would. Itâ€”he, perhaps?â€”hadn't the bulk of Mor'du, but arrows would probably do as much damage to it as they'd done to the demon bearâ€”the cursed bear, she amended. Hiccup was too trusting by half, and she believed more and more with every passing moment that he wasn't one of them. That didn't mean he was safe, though.

He came back with two wooden mugs and held one out to her. The sound of liquid sloshing inside made her mouth feel dry and she licked her lips, but she stared hard at the mug, as if she could see through it. At her hesitation Hiccup pulled back the hand and she wanted to cry out and leap forward to take the drink, no matter what it was. As she watched he took a healthy swallow, then offered the mug again, and she felt a tinge of shame at suspecting the worst of his intentions. She took the mug and drank greedily until she remembered herself. Then it was her turn to smile, embarrassed.

He looked into his mug, then said a word, as unintelligible as before. When she didn't understand he dipped his fingers into the mug and shook off the droplets as he repeated himself. Did he mean water? It sounded nothing like the word she knew. She parroted it back and he grinned, and any last doubts disappeared from her mind. There was no earthly way she could mistrust someone who smiled so crooked and pleased at something so unimportant.

If he'd taught her his word, she could teach him hers, so she said "Water" and it was his turn to repeat it. While he was speaking she flicked water onto his face and giggled. He looked resigned as water dripped from his nose. She finished the water in her mug and then held it out, only just thinking that she shouldn't have done that if she had to depend on his good graces. \_Always be polite, even to those who serve you\_, her mother's voice reminded her, so she asked in his language, hoping he saw the apology on her face and heard the "Please" in her voice. The smile on his face as he took the mug and walked away seemed to mean he had.

## 2. Chapter 2

The next time she woke there was no fear. She was curled up at one end of the couch and alone in the room. Now that it was bright enough now to see without having to depend on the firelight there was no sign of either Hiccup or Toothless, or of anyone else who must live thereâ€”as she looked around it was clear that the house was too big for just one person, even if he did keep a dragon indoors. It was all wood, in thick solid planks; rough stairs led to unseen rooms on a floor above. Now sure that she was a guest and not a hostage here, she felt confident about going looking for something to drink.

Between the couch and kitchen was a table. A book sat closed on it, but she was far more interested in the bowl of steaming porridge. It was plain, without any cream or honey drizzled on top, the way she liked it, but her stomach rumbled emptily at the scent of food. She'd just have a bite, she thought, picking up the carved spoon; one good bite would hold her until Hiccup reappeared. She dipped the spoon

into the bowl and raised it, blowing gently before putting it in her mouth. It still burned her tongue, but she swallowed it anyway. Instead of smoothing the surface of the porridge, replacing the spoon, and carrying on to the kitchen, Merida found herself sitting at the table and scooping more porridge into her mouth. After \_this\_ bite she would stop, then.

A few spoonfuls later she'd given up her token resistance and was eating steadily. She was so engrossed in her meal that she didn't notice anyone else in the room until a shout startled her, shaking porridge from the spoon onto the table. A man even bigger than her dad was standing there, glaring down at her, his hair still mussed and his beard wild. His hair was reddish brown, like Hiccup's, and she guessed that the man was his father. He put thick hands on his hips and demanded something as she stared up at him. The expression on his face was so similar to her dad's when the triplets woke him too early in the morning that she couldn't feel afraid.

Hiccup came in then and glanced between the two of them. The large man asked him a question and he answered, then went back into the kitchen. He emerged with a second bowl of porridge, which he set on the table before his father; the man sat, but not without grumbling. As they spoke Hiccup said her name, and she looked at him as he pointed. "Stoick."

The man grunted "Merida," sticking one huge arm across the table to her. Immediately she set down her spoon and took his hand firmly, looking him straight in the eye with a nod and saying, "Stoick." If he had any more objections to her he didn't bring them up, just dropped her hand and picked up his spoon, and they ate together.

\* \* \*

><p>After they'd finished Stoick collected their bowls, took them into the kitchen, and then disappeared out the door. If Hiccup had eaten, she hadn't seen him, and she hoped she hadn't taken his breakfast. He'd gone up the stairs even before Stoick had left, leaving her to wait forâ€|whatever was going to happen next.<p>

Mum would have a fit at the state of her right now: dress hem ragged and stained from the mud and salt water and who knew what else, the whole of it wrinkled and creased. Even if she hadn't any other clothes to put on, she could at least make an effort with these. She brushed away what she could, both dust and caked mud falling from the fabric; she'd need a good wash herself sometime soon. If she were at home even Maudie would give the dress up for lost, and probably give her a good scolding in the meanwhile for daring to go and get kidnapped wearing one of her decent dresses. Merida counted herself lucky that she was still fully clothed and let it go at that, though she had rather liked the embroidery on this one.

Her hair, though, that was a different matter altogether. She held in a bitter sigh as she reached up hesitantly. Her hair was a challenge on the best of days; days on end without a good combing would leave it a hopeless mess. And had, apparently. There even seemed to be small sticks in it. She wondered what her mother would say if she came home with it all hacked off somehowâ€"providing she found a blade strong enough to cut through it. She did sigh then, and dropped her hands as she heard Hiccup's feet on the stairs. It made no difference how clean her dress was if her head looked like she'd been

dragged backward through a bramble patch.

Hiccup stood in front of her and held out a hand. In it lay a wide-toothed comb, carved in light wood. It was exactly what she needed, though she hoped desperately he hadn't gone and searched it out specially after seeing her hair. It really was in a hopeless state if a boy had noticed how bad it looked.

Bless the lad, he seemed to know she felt bad, because he started talking. She was prepared for more nonsense, but then he said "moir" and she gasped. It sounded so familiar, and she latched onto it immediately, though she feared it would turn out to be false hope again. But she had to ask, just in case.

"Mother?" He was slightly wide-eyed as she looked around and asked again, "Mother?" Was his mother around here somewhere? Why hadn't she seen her yet? Merida had seen what his father looked like—what must his mother look like?

But Hiccup shook his head and her heart sank. She'd been without her mother, sort of, for two days, and now for a longer time, but she had every confidence she'd see Elinor again. She'd only had a glimpse of what life would be like without a mother, and it had made her cherish her mother all the more. She felt her eyes starting to well as she looked at Hiccup, whose expression was longing and empty and trying so hard not to show it. He closed his hand around the comb and spoke quietly, a denial that nearly broke her heart.

Even if he could understand her words, she still wouldn't be able to comfort him, not properly. She reached out and touched his arm, just her fingertips against his sleeve, and though he didn't withdraw, he didn't look at her, either, staring at the floor instead. After a moment he took a deep breath and unclenched his fist, offering the comb again; as she took it up she saw the marks where the tines had bitten into his palm.

The comb was sturdy. She was glad of that as she dragged it through the worst of the knots. It would take hours to get all the tangles free, but she didn't think that Hiccup wanted to wait around while she wrestled with it. She gave it a cursory going-over, hoping that it looked more presentable now, and that maybe later she'd get a chance to finish the job. When she was finished she handed it back to Hiccup where he sat at the table, kicking his heels. He gave a half-smile and placed it on the table, on top of the book she'd seen before.

With excitement buzzing beneath her skin she followed him to the door. Now that she was safe, with someone she trusted—and, right or wrong, she did trust Hiccup—she could look forward to new things. She was about to see where she'd ended up, which could help her find a way home. He opened the door to a sunny day.

Toothless was lying in the grass outside the door, looking less like a magical creature than like one of her dad's hounds. Last night she hadn't seen much more than his vague dark shape and his shining eyes; now, highlighted by the sun, she saw the patterns to his hide, the slight pebbling, the curve of his claws. There was something almost beautiful about him, and she took a half step closer; then he rolled over, legs in the air, scratching his back, and she froze. When Hiccup spoke to the dragon he stood and walked down the dirt path

ahead of Hiccup.

Along the path there were buildings, all wooden, with peaked roofs and carved beams. They clustered more thickly together further down the hill, and the sounds of the village filtered toward them: voices calling, the creak of ropes and the clang of hammers striking metal. Beyond the rooftops the sea stretched off to the horizon. Lovely as it was, the view offered no clue of which way her home lay, and she pulled the cloak around her in the cool breeze.

"Merida," Hiccup called, beckoning for her to follow, and with her head held high she joined him.

### 3. Chapter 3

From what she saw on their walk, the village had no castle or walls. The endless sea was one deterrent, she supposed, and the dragons another. She'd always thought that dragons were terrible beasties, carnivorous and cold, rampaging indiscriminately; here they waddled through the streets, perched on roofs, swooped overhead with gusts of wind in their wakes, and no one was fleeing in terror or being eaten alive. None of it was what she would have expected. She tried to look around without gawking, to notice without being noticed, to keep herself composed. Head up, shoulders back, her mother's voice reminded her; if you carry yourself with confidence, you will feel confident.

Outside the largest building they stopped while Toothless continued on his way. Most pets didn't just wander off from their masters like that, at least not in DunBroch. She cocked an eyebrow at Hiccup, and he shrugged first, then flapped his wings like some kind of lanky bird—a heron, maybe. Of course the dragon would go out flying. Merida watched him go, wondering if he came when Hiccup called.

This building seemed to serve the same purpose as the great hall at home, with tables around a huge circular hearth, and carved and painted decorations covering the walls. Stoick waited inside with an old woman who carried a long staff, an old man, thin and stooped, and a blond boy built like Young MacGuffin, though with a ready smile. They all but ignored Hiccup in favor of staring at her. It made her glad he'd found the comb.

She stood beside Hiccup as he spoke to them; all she understood were the names she'd learned and the word mother. Merida watched the old woman, wondering if she was a witch. The others respected her, that much was clear, even though she hadn't said a word yet. Wouldn't a witch be able to understand her, or do some magic that let them communicate? This time she had nothing to offer in return, and she wouldn't want Hiccup to give something up on her behalf. Besides, Merida wasn't sure she'd ask for help from a witch again—especially not one she couldn't understand.

The old man spoke then, and Hiccup seemed excited at whatever he was saying. The man turned to her, made a bit of a show of warming up, and let forth a torrent of noise. Sometimes the boys talked to each other in their own language, and this sounded a bit like that; the last time she'd heard anything similar from an adult had been one of her kidnappers getting seasick in the storm. The noise changed to something more pleasant and rolling, and then to a pounding chant. It



was obvious from the others' expressions that they were hoping she'd understand something of it, but though she listened carefully, there was nothing that even came close to her earlier discovery with Hiccup.

He looked so dejected as she shook her head apologetically. The poor lad was trying so hard, and it seemed like there was nothing she could do to help. At a few words from Stoick he looked up, though, producing a small book and a stick of charcoal; and when the old woman spoke he brightened considerably—and then looked embarrassed immediately after as the woman laughed.

Hiccup moved to sit at one of the tables nearby and she followed him, sitting and waiting as he tapped his fingers against the scarred wood, deep in thought. Then on a blank page of his book he sketched a skinny body with an artificial leg that was obviously an oversimplified version of himself. "Hiccup," she said. Next to it he added the large figure of his father, and she laughed. "Stoick." Around the pair he drew their house; then the rest of the village, then the surrounding area. Though he drew quickly, his movements were fluid and his face was relaxed. Just watching him draw was calming, the flick of his wrist and the faint scritch of the charcoal over the paper.

They were on an island, she learned, and he even drew a curly-haired figure on one part of the coastline. She frowned in mock outrage at the little Merida and he apologized until he looked up and saw her grin. When he realized she was teasing him he rolled his eyes and grumbled. "You're a dear wee lamb," she cooed, patting him on the cheek, and his face flamed violently.

Once he'd finished, Hiccup indicated that she should do as he had. She was no great artist, but hopefully she'd be able to show something that made sense. She started with herself, curls and a dress; her mum next, then the boys, then her dad, complete with his wooden leg. That surprised Hiccup.

She turned back to his picture and pointed to father and son. "Hiccup, Stoick; Merida, Fergus. Father."

"\_FaÃ°ir\_," he said, peering at her family. The resemblance between their fathers was a bit odd, really, though Stoick was more reserved than Fergus. But that was understandable: her dad would be less joyful, less outgoing, less everything if anything happened to his wife. Hiccup pointed to the figure of her mum then and said, "\_MoÃ°ir\_."

Merida nodded. "Elinor." She swallowed the lump of loneliness in her throat at the thought of her mum.

Hiccup studied Elinor's smooth hair and the head of frizz she'd drawn on her dad before he reached out and tugged carefully at a lock of hers, asking, "Fergus?" She had her father's hair, all right, and from the look on his face he'd known that and asked anyway. If he'd been trying to make her feel better, it worked.

She went back to drawing. Apparently they were standing on the wall that surrounded the castle. She added the lake, lots of trees, the hills off in the distance, but she couldn't show a defined border—she really ought to have paid more attention in her lessons

instead of daydreaming and doodling. After a moment she shrugged.

Hiccup slapped himself on the forehead and showed her his picture. "Berk," he said, putting a name to it. She hadn't heard of any Berk in her geography lessonsâ€”and she vowed never to let her mother know how much she was currently regretting her inattentionâ€”but it was becoming clear that she was far from home.

She tapped the kingdom and said, "DunBroch."

While Hiccup relayed the information to the others, the big lad, Fishlegs, sought something out in one of his books. When the others had said nothing of consequence, Hiccup turned to Fishlegs and spoke fervently.

The boy looked at her map and to his books, comparing and flipping pages. He didn't look up as he asked a few questions. This time all of them stared until he looked up; then he smiled sheepishly and sketched a river in the corner of the page. Well, who knew they'd want the river as well? She added it in, off where it started in the mountains and to where it met the loch. Fishlegs laughed happily as she joined the two.

He held up one of his books, where a castle nestled in the hills by a loch. It was DunBroch, right enough. She nodded her head, grinning, and patted Hiccup's arm. Despite her poor drawing, they'd found her home. Hiccup looked almost as excited as she felt, and when he praised Fishlegs, the other boy smiled.

Stoick asked a question and Fishlegs turned pages. He pointed to an island, far out in the ocean, then trailed his finger down the page. And down, and down some more. Her heart sank when she saw how far from home she'd ended up. But they had a dragon, and a dragon flying had to be faster than a ship.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Hiccup shook his head. Whatever he said didn't sound that encouraging, either. She looked at Stoick; his expression was unreadable, which didn't strike her as a particularly good thing. He said something and Fishlegs stood, gathering up his books, while Hiccup closed up his sketchbook.

She followed them out of the hall, not sure how she felt. On one hand, they hadn't come up with the easy solution that she'd been hoping for, but on the other, they knew more than they had before. She decided that a little optimism wouldn't hurt; it may have been a small victory, but enough small victories could win the war.

Besides, they were in the middle of the village now, and there was a lot to see. Fishlegs and Hiccup talked quietly as they walked, but she paid no attention. Fishlegs took his load of books in one direction, and she and Hiccup continued down the path. It was a lovely day, and even though she knew people were staring at her, she didn't mind. Why shouldn't they stare? She was a stranger in their home; if someone new had shown up to DunBroch she'd certainly be interested in them.

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><p>A loud voice called Hiccup's name from behind them and he groaned. They both turned, and over his shoulder Merida saw a thick-set boy with spiky dark hair and an unpleasant expression. He joined them, barking at Hiccup until his eyes drifted to her. His expression changed, though it wasn't much of an improvement.<p>

Hiccup greeted him and introduced Merida; the boy responded by shoving him out of the way and grabbing her hand with surprising quickness. It took all of her self-control to keep from punching him in the face as he kissed the back of her hand. It didn't help that Hiccup was watching and looked almost amused by her discomfort. When the boy looked up she gave a short nod, more than he deserved, and he finally dropped her hand to cross his arms over his chest.

Hiccup's answer to the boy's question included Toothless' name, and she nodded. Whatever he'd said, Toothless was better than spending more time with this lout. The boy stared at them, confused and a little suspicious, and Hiccup took advantage of it to grab her hand and pull her away.

He didn't drop her hand as they walked, and she swung their hands playfully. Hiccup started pointing to things and talking, even knowing she wouldn't understand; if it made him happy, she wouldn't try to stop him. People stared at her on the path and from their doorways, looking at her dress, her hair, her hand in his. When he noticed that he dropped her hand and pointed at a bird, and she hid a smile.

Shouts and clanging were coming from a nearby shop and he swerved toward it instinctively. He paused at the door and a voice called out; Hiccup answered, leading her forward. The man who appeared was blond and burly (though burly seemed to be normal here in Berk), with a large hammer where his left hand should be. When she got home she'd have to tell her dad that his wooden leg was old-fashioned.

The smith looked her over briefly, then he and Hiccup bickered familiarly. He stuck out his hand, introducing himself as Gobber.

"Merida," she said, and Hiccup added DunBroch to that.

Gobber ushered her in to the building. It was a forge, warm from the fires and full of tools and bits of metal. There were two boys lurking, staring at her, and Gobber put his hand on one's head, calling him Wart, and the other Squatwiggles. At least she thought those were their names; it was a little hard to tell sometimes. They weren't like any names she knew.

The boysâ€”apprentices, probably, because neither of them looked like Gobberâ€”were older than the triplets, but they had the same enthusiasm and energy. They watched her keenly as Gobber showed her around. A pair of half-finished knives sat on a small anvil, the apprentices' current project; around the shop there was work both functional and fine. It was all very nice, and she liked Gobber and his assistants as they bustled around, proud of their work. Then Gobber knocked his fist against a barrel full of arrowheads and a grin spread across her face.

"Have you got a bow somewhere?" she asked. "I swear, if I'd had mine

that day I never would have been taken hostage. I'd love to shoot again if you've got one. You needn't worry, I'm a dead shot. I won't hit anyone I'm not aiming for."

They stared, uncomprehending. Merida sighed and moved automatically into shooting position, left arm extending and right pulling the invisible string back. At that Gobber answered, and stomped out of the shop and across the way. Through the open door she could see all kinds of wooden objects and she shuddered, hoping there weren't any bears. There was, however, a bow hanging on the wall, strung and ready to shoot; below it was a wooden bucket filled with fletched shafts. Gobber was arguing with the other craftsman, but all she wanted to do was shoot. Everything would feel better once she got the bow in her hands, felt the tension in the string against her fingers, heard the arrow sing through the air.

Eventually the woodworker returned to his shop and brought out a bow and a quiver of arrows, offering them with bad grace. Merida accepted them gratefully nonetheless, running her hand down the curve of the bow. It was a bit long for her, and stiff with newness. Now all she needed was a target.

She looked down toward the sea, the way crowded with houses and people, then back up the way they'd come. Midway up the hill a roof beam protruded, dark against the grass behind it, and she plucked up an arrow and fired. An ache inside her didn't disappear altogether, but eased. She sighed and smiled.

When she looked back Hiccup's mouth was hanging open. Gobber and the other man looked shocked as well, and to hide her laugh she schooled her features into a solemn expression and nodded her approval of the bow. She didn't want to relinquish it, but she had nothing to give in exchange, so she held it out again. None of the men moved; they spoke to each other quietly. Finally Hiccup stepped forward and pushed her hands back. She pulled the bow close, wild hope blooming in her, and he nodded. To them it probably wouldn't make any sense, but this far from DunBroch, the bow in her hand made her feel whole, and grounded, like a piece of her—of her \_soul\_—that had been missing was returned.

She threw her arms around Hiccup. He stiffened briefly as she murmured "Thank you" into his shirt, and she let him go, not without noticing the red flooding his face. She embraced the woodworker as well, who was perhaps even more terrified than Hiccup had been surprised.

#### 4. Chapter 4

After the men had gone back to their respective shops, one of them still quaking, Hiccup asked her a question. Toothless was part of it, and there seemed to be two options; she figured that one was to continue looking for the dragon and the other one was, maybe, to go somewhere and shoot. As much as her fingers itched to draw the string again and let out days of frustration on whatever targets she could find, she was also curious about where Toothless was. And Hiccup might actually want to look for him as well. Besides, she'd gone this long without shooting; she could wait a bit longer, until they found Toothless, if that was what Hiccup wanted. She owed it to Hiccup, and anyway, if Angus had gone off somewhere, she'd want to look for him,

too.

"Toothless," she said. Hiccup broke out in a relieved grin even before he asked another question, short, and she nodded her agreement.

They made their way further down into the village, with no sign of Toothless. Other dragons came and went, some squat and heavy, some spindly, some with two heads; green and blue and orange and yellow, but no black, powerful ones. Eventually they walked all the way to the end of the docks, with only the sea before them.

In DunBroch you could see the hills on the far side of the loch, but this water stretched on and on until it touched the edge of the sky. Hiccup sat with his feet over the edge of the dock as she stared, standing a moment longer. Then she laid down the bow and arrows and sat next to him, swinging her feet. The sight of the sea reminded her of a song her mother sang sometimes, and she hummed it now, hands clasped in her lap.

"\_Vatn\_," she said, spreading her arms to indicate the water and its vastness, "big. Toothless big, \_vatn\_ big."

"\_Mikill?\_ Toothless \_mikill\_, \_vatn mikill\_â€|" He gave her a grin. "Stoick \_mikill\_."

"Stoick \_mikill\_," she repeated in agreement.

Beside her Hiccup took a breath and tried, "Fergus big?" His face was screwed up, like he was afraid of getting it wrong, and she clapped, happy that he'd tried. He looked away, out over the water, and kicked a foot out in gesture. "\_Vatn mikill\_: \_sjor\_."

"\_Sjor\_," she said, turning the word in her mouth. "\_Sjor, sjor, sjor. Sjor, vatn, mikill\_." When she turned to him to ask what color the sea was, his eyes were on hers, and for a moment she forgot what she meant to say. Then his stomach rumbled, loud enough for her to hear it, and she laughed, relieved that he hadn't noticed her pause.

He rubbed his midsection and then swung his legs up as he said something. Merida bounded easily to her feet, though the skirt caught on a piece of wood as she did. How she'd survived so long in this dress was in all honesty a mystery. Hiccup leaned over and freed the hem from where it'd snagged, a gesture small but effortlessly kind.

He'd grabbed her hand earlier, to get her away from the boy who'd been leering; there was no reason why she couldn't return the favor. She reached down and took his hand and pulled slightlyâ€"she'd learned early not to catch her father off-guard, especially after the first time he'd fallen on herâ€"and he looked torn. Maybe he was too proud to want help, or maybe he didn't want help from a girl; maybe he didn't want her to think he was weak. Whatever had given him pause, he soon got over it and let her pull.

She saw too late that he was using his other arm to push up at the same time. Between the both of them it was too much power to raise him smoothly, and he shot up, stumbling forward and into her. As she staggered back, an arm stronger than it looked wrapped around her

waist, holding her steady. His arm was warm on her back, and she didn't know where to look.

"Sorry," she murmured as he chuckled.

A commotion in the village made him look away, down the dock. He stepped away from her as Toothless raced toward them with frightening speed, carrying something pale in his mouth. When Toothless slid to a stop he dropped what he carried in front of Hiccup and lay on the dock, alert and impatient; as Hiccup spoke his eyes darted from the boy's face to the bundle on the dock, ears wriggling. From the bundle Hiccup produced a light saddle and a red fin, which he strapped to Toothless' tail. While he worked Merida retrieved the bow and quiver, feeling a slight unease creep through her. Hiccup and Toothless were going to fly somewhere, though at the moment it seemed only the dragon knew where. Hiccup mounted and then looked down at her, doubt flickering on his face; then he pointed firmly and issued an order—"an \_order\_. To her. She glared up at him.

"\_Ooooh\_. You can't expect that to work, can you? Listen, lad, you're not leaving me standing here on this dock, waiting for you to get back from doing who knows what. I won't do it. And I'm not walking back through that village alone with everyone staring at me. You're the only one in this place I trust, and I don't wantâ€¦ I'll not be left here, and that's final." She hoped the combination of her body language and tone got her point across well enough.

Though his eyes were wide, he held out his hand immediately. She let out a breath and took it, swinging onto Toothless' back and putting her hands around Hiccup's waist. Without any urging from him Toothless broke into a run, racing back up the dock and then hurtling into the air. Her stomach seemed to float free within her, and she tightened her grip on Hiccup.

Everyone knew that dragons flew. It was part of the description: great big scaly flying things that breathed fire. But she'd only just come to believeâ€¦to see with her own eyes that they really existed, that they weren't just stories that parents told to children. Of course she wasn't prepared for the feeling of flying. She squeezed her eyes shut briefly, not yet ready to see the ground rushing far below them; she concentrated on Hiccup's breathing, even and strong, under her hands. He was leant forward, close to Toothless' back as they raced along, the way she sometimes did when she was urging Angus to his top speed. But Angus at his fastest couldn't hold a candle to Toothless in the air.

She opened her eyes to clouds rushing by and treetops a blur below. Toothless dived toward the trees and Merida squeaked as her body rose from the dragon's back. He slowed, and they looked down.

For a moment she couldn't get her bearings and her stomach lurched. Then she saw the men on the cliff. It was them. Even from the air, even without being able to hear them or smell them, she could tell. She gasped, praying that they didn't look up, that they wouldn't see her; she felt her hair streaming behind her like a pennant that she feared they couldn't miss. She crouched low behind Hiccup, her forehead against his back as she tried to control her shaking nerves.

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless landed at a gallop and skidded to a halt in front of the great hall. Hiccup tumbled off and paused long enough to help Merida slide down; then all three ran in, Hiccup calling. Stoick answered, not looking up from what he was doing until Hiccup told him what they'd seen.<p>

\_Stop shaking\_, she told herself sternly. \_You're fine. They didn't see you\_. Hiccup glanced at her, and she tightened her grip on the quiver. \_Stop acting like some frightened bunny. You're the princess of DunBroch, daughter of the Bear King\_. \_You're not afraid of some manky kidnappers.\_

Stoick stood and walked toward the door as he and Hiccup talked, the boy following his father. She heard him ask her name, and Stoick looked at her. Without even needing to think she straightened her back, though if anyone could see it was a show of strength that she didn't really feel, it would be Stoick. Still, there was no reason to give them more to worry about. She could stand on her own, and now she could defend herself. \_Let them come\_, she thought, staring at Stoick. The anger she'd felt toward her captors flared again, just enough to start burning away some of the fear. \_Let them see what happens if they try to take me again\_. It may have been false bravado, but it made her feel a little better.

He shook his head and spoke to Hiccup again before exiting the hall. Hiccup turned back to her, looking nervous, and no wonder after she'd told him off earlier. She'd understood Stoick well enough, though, and no matter how strong she acted in front of him, she wasn't really looking forward to facing the kidnappers. Not yet. So she looked at Hiccup with half a smile and pointed at the ground like he had done before.

The relief on his face made her feel guilty for haranguing him the first time. His tone was almost pleading, but then he made a promise, and she knew he would do whatever he had to to keep it. She ought to say something: something to show that she understood, was grateful, believed him. "Hiccup," she said, without knowing what would follow; but when he looked at her, concerned and serious, it came to her. She reached out and laid her palm against his chest, over the place where his heart was beating, and said, "\_Mikill\_."

## 5. Chapter 5

Then he was gone, running out the door, and Toothless' shadow filled the open door as he took flight. She was alone in the hall.

She didn't know what to do with her nervous energy. At home she'd go for a ride, make a pincushion of a target, climb the Crone's Toothâ€"anything to keep her hands occupied, to move until it shook the worried thoughts out of her head. But she ought to stay close to the hall in case they came back soon. She paced the circular hall, trying not to think of home and failing.

The last time she'd seen it, the buds were full on the trees, waiting for their secret sign to burst into bloom. They must have done by now, which would mean that, on the days it wasn't raining, the air would be rife with the scent of millions of tiny flowers and thrumming with honeybees at work. The hills over the loch would have

turned from winter grey to purple with the heather, and the boys would be impatient to go berrying, though they'd never once come back not stained and sick to their stomachs. One of Dad's hounds had just fallen pregnant when Merida had gone; she had plenty of time to make it home before Sona whelped. He'd promised one to her, and to the boys, if each could take care of a pup himself. One for the three of them to share sounded like a better idea to her; there'd be only a third of the mess to clean when the triplets invariably left their hounds ignorant of basic commands in favor of teaching them to aid their mischief.

They should be at their lessons now, and she wondered who was teaching them while she was away. Dad had better not be letting them forget all the things she'd fought so hard to teach them just because she was missing. Harris liked learning the letters, while Hubert and Hamish preferred numbers; it was easy to get them to pay attention to maths when she asked questions like "If there are a baker's dozen cakes, how many can each of us have, both with and without Mum giving up part of her share to anyone else?"

She didn't worry about the boys nearly as much as she did about their parents, though. Her dad would doubtless be blaming himself; her mum would tense and tighten as she went about her tasks in public, but in private she would eventually fall apart. Merida's eyes started to fill with tears as she pictured her mother sitting in her empty room late at night, wondering where her daughter had gone. She shook her head violently and wiped away the tears that tracked down her face. There was nothing to cry about, not now. She'd see her family again.

\* \* \*

><p>By the time the doors crashed open she'd studied every carving in the hall, and all the graffiti gouged into the tables; the strange, stick-like figures didn't mean anything to her, but she liked the way some of them looked, like winter trees. She hurried toward the door, only to shrink back when the Vikings brought in a group of the kidnappers, roped together like wayward sheep. There were only six of them there, and none of the ones she'd ever spoken to, but they recognized her nonetheless, and hooted and called to her. Stoick shouted at them and directed the other Vikings to move the kidnappers close to the fire. Gobber, Wart, and Squatwiggles came in, lugging heavy, clinking sacks with them, from which they produced chains and got to work securing their captives.<p>

She stared hard at the men who'd taken her hostage. They looked dirty and defiant, jeering and lunging at the apprentices. The anger bubbled up again at the sight of them trying to bully the boys, and the anger overcame her fear.

"Stop that!" she snapped, and everyone present in fact froze, staring at her. "You're a bunch of cowards. It's bad enough that you kidnapped me, but now you want to make fun of these lads, too? You should regret the day you were born."

She would have said and possibly done more had Stoick not intervened. He took hold of one arm and walked her toward the door, calling as he did; a tall, thin girl joined them. At the door he stopped and looked Merida in the eye. Instead of listening to his words, she inserted what her dad might say: \_Merida, it's no use getting angry at people



like that. They'll never believe that they're wrong. I know it pains you, lass, but you must learn to control your temper. Sometimes the best course of action is to walk away, rather than doing anything rash. Now run up to your room for a bit and I'll tell your mother it's all sorted. \_Stoick's version was markedly sterner than Fergus' would have been, but the part about leaving to cool off was apparently the same, because he gave her a push out the door.

The other girl was none too pleased with her task of escorting Merida. She led her through the village, stopping at a shop to pick up a loaf of bread before continuing up the hill. Her long blonde hair hung in thick, practical ropes, and she wore a helmet with two sets of horns attached to it; she was quite pretty, Merida thought, and she'd be even more so if she smiled. The two of them trudged on, and eventually the other girl pushed open the door to Stoick and Hiccup's house, then dumped the bread on the table and left, all without a word.

The house was cool, the fire dead in the hearth. If nothing else, she could see to that before the others came back. There was wood stacked outside and she built up a tent of logs, kindling nestled within; it took a few minutes to find a flint or tinderbox, and she realized that with a dragon around they probably had more efficient ways to light their fires. Once the kindling had caught, she straightened the blankets and furs on the couch. Then she took the opportunity to do a thorough job of combing out her hair.

The comb had gotten stuck for the fourth time when the door opened and the blonde girl came in again, carrying an armful of fabric. She grinned when she saw Merida yanking against a particularly nasty knot, and dropped her bundle on the table before letting herself out again, chuckling. Merida made a face at the closed door and pulled the comb free before getting up to inspect the new thing. They were dresses, sort of: two plain shifts and a smock-like overdress for each. If they belonged to the girl who'd brought them, Merida didn't think they'd fit; the other girl was taller and slimmer than her. But they looked close enough to try. She was more than happy to shed the dirty dress, and managed a decent wash before donning one of the shifts, the russet one. It fit better than expected, even a little loosely, and she pulled the brown apron over the top. The material was coarser than her own dress, but it was clean and dry and not the same thing she'd been wearing for weeks. By the time Stoick arrived she was well groomed and feeling oddly content.

He came in carrying a covered metal pot, which he set near the fire. Then, hands on his hips, he looked her over and nodded, smiling. She grinned back and watched as he set about getting bowls, spoons, and cups and laying the table with them. As he worked, the scent of some food began to fill the air, and she realized that the pot must be dinner. It smelled \_good\_—she hadn't had a proper meal since she'd been taken, the kidnappers mostly serving salted meat and hard bread, things that could be eaten without cooking. There was meat in the pot, though what kind she couldn't tell, and onions, and thyme and mint, and Stoick was slicing the bread into thirds and producing a small container filled with thick butter. If she closed her eyes and imagined the sound of three pairs of feet on flagstones and harried voices calling, she could be at home.

Stoick dished out two bowls full of stew and carried them to the table, motioning with his head for Merida to sit. He put a bowl in

front of her and she smiled her thanks, steam from the stew wafting into her face. Stoick picked up his spoon and waited until she did the same before dipping it into the stew. She wasn't sure if she was just hungry or if the food was really as good as it seemed; either way, she had to keep herself from eating as quickly as possible. The bread was crusty on the outside and warm and soft on the inside, and she spread some butter over a bit of it. The butter tastedâ€|strange. Or maybe just different to how she'd expected it to taste, though it looked like regular butter; she supposed that it was to be expected, foods not tasting exactly the same as they would at home.

Stoick had noticed her inspecting her bread and butter and looked mildly concerned. Merida took a second to think of how she might phrase her question, given that none of the words she needed were currently in her limited vocabulary. Finally she pointed into the tub of butter and mooed like a small cow with a question. When he chuckled she turned red, though his laughter was so pleasant and deep that she couldn't help smiling too. He shook his head and answered with a baa, and then it was her turn to laugh.

When they'd both finished eating, Stoick stood and began to clear the table, but she snatched up her utensils and rushed into the kitchen with them. Then she had to stand there until he joined her and dropped his things in a basin, which he filled with water. As he started to plunge his hands into the water and wash the dishes, she pushed up her sleeves and butted him out of the way, only really succeeding by catching him off guard. He grumbled in surprise and she wrinkled her nose at him, smiling. Stoick almost ruffled her hair but paused with his hand hovering in the air over her head; Merida rolled her eyes and bounced on her tiptoes, bobbing her head against his hand. He chuckled again and really did ruffle her hair this time.

## 6. Chapter 6

She had been staring at the swords on the wall, thinking about taking one down to give it a few swings, when the door opened and Hiccup came in. His clothes were covered in a layer of dust and dirt and his head was down, lost in thought as he walked; but when she jumped to her feet he looked at her with a strange expression on his face. He said something and pulled her to the table, drawing in his sketchbook a little picture of her family. She cocked her head, unsure of what else he had to say about her family, especially when the kidnappers had been foundâ€|surely that would be more pressing than anything else. Once they were all on the page, Hiccup used strong, thick lines to add pointed crowns to their heads. His voice was strained as he asked a question about Fergus and her mother, gesturing emphatically with a bruised hand at their little crowns.

Oh. That. Truth be told, it hadn't seemed important enough to try to communicate. She'd also forgotten that it was something he wouldn't have knownâ€|at home no one needed to be told her position, so she'd never had to tell anyone she was the princess, the eldest child of the king of DunBroch, the presumptive heir to the throne. She didn't really think it would change the way either Hiccup or his father treated her, anyway, though he seemed upset about it. But Stoick was the leader, wasn't he? If not the king, at least something like one of the clan chieftains? She shrugged one shoulder, then

grabbed the charcoal from his fingers and drew him and Stoick, giving the latter the same kind of crown as her father. Hiccup shook his head and reclaimed the charcoal, drawing other villagers all pointing to Stoick. So he'd been chosen the leader, like her dad had, but they didn't call him a king.

The older man asked a question now, descending from whatever he'd been at upstairs. Stoick looked more tired than he had before as he spoke with his son, rummaging in the kitchen. She knew they were talking about her and tried not to look too curious. How had Hiccup found out, though? He seemed upset by the revelation, though Stoick answered mildly, serving Hiccup a bowl of the stew and the rest of the bread. He comforted his son with a few words and a ruffle of his hair, and patted Merida's shoulder before leaving. She smiled after him.

Hiccup was sniffing the stew with relish; he'd probably gone all day without eating. When he spooned some into his mouth he all but moaned with pleasure, his earlier discomfort forgotten. The sound caused a tickle low in Merida's spine and she coughed, shifting slightly in her seat. He mumbled something, then swallowed and repeated himself before sliding the bowl toward her. She shook her head. Even if she hadn't already eaten, she wouldn't dream of taking food from him, not when she had an idea how hard he'd worked. He pulled the bowl back and kept eating, straightening up from his slump somewhat.

She felt fidgety and leapt from her seat. "\_Vatn?\_" she offered, walking backward to see his face for the answer. A brief mischievous look flashed over his face before he carefully schooled his expression and answered without gestures, only words, the rascal. She stuck her tongue out and spun around with a satisfying whirl. He'd get water whether he wanted it or not, especially since she was fairly sure he'd said yes. She filled two cups and brought them back, putting one in front of him. He smiled at that and thanked her as she sat again.

His fingers ran over the fabric at her wrist—"so he had noticed the new dress"—and he made some comment, his voice gone low. It was just from tiredness, surely; whatever had happened with the kidnappers that afternoon had kept him away for longer than anyone else and had drained him. He did look tired when their eyes met, and mustered a half smile as he talked. It would be so nice to be able to understand him. Apart from thanking him she wouldn't have anything worth saying, but he would.

She cleared his empty bowl away and returned to see him yawning his head off. She'd just sat down again when a knock sounded at the door. With a slight scowl Hiccup rose to answer it; from the door she heard a girl's voice, talking to him in an easy, familiar rhythm. Merida wondered if it was the same girl from that afternoon. She pulled Hiccup's sketchbook close and began leafing through it idly. She was studying a diagram of Toothless when Hiccup said her name.

The girl, a different one than before, was regarding her coldly, eyeing her up and down. She had blonde hair pulled back in a braid with an uneven fringe. Merida looked at her outfit with vague interest: she wore tight leggings and boots, a studded leather skirt and a close-fitting shirt. The other girl had worn something similar, and she understood why. It was a practical costume—"if she'd been kidnapped in that she would have been much happier. Maybe this

Astrid, as Hiccup introduced her, could help her find an outfit like that. Don't count on it, she told herself as Astrid turned to Hiccup with an unhappy expression.

When the door closed, Hiccup didn't look too pleased, either. As he crossed the room he looked resigned and thoughtful, and said something in a restrained tone, indicating the stairs with a toss of his head. She nodded, and after he'd climbed to the top she went to the couch, drew a blanket over herself, and lay staring at the ceiling until sleep took over.

\* \* \*

><p>She woke to footsteps on the stairs. Stoick rumbled a good morning to her as she stretched; Hiccup was already setting out bowls of porridge. When they'd breakfasted and washed up the three of them together walked down into the village. Stoick had seemed surprised when Hiccup had stopped him from leaving alone, cutting his eyes from his son back to her, but he'd waited for them. Gobber and the apprentices met them at the door, the boys excited about having a morning off from their work.<p>

The kidnappers were being given breakfast inside, and Merida clenched her fists at her sides. Gobber gave the boys an order and they headed toward the far side of the hall, taking her hands and pulling her with them. She shot a confused look over her shoulder, but Stoick nodded, and Hiccup smiled as Squatwiggle and Wart led her to a table and sat her facing away from whatever was going on on the opposite side of the hall.

She tried her best to concentrate on the game they were teaching her, demonstrating with exaggerated movements. The two boys were about the same age, a bit older than her brothers, and they looked related, though they weren't twins. Wart was shorter and missing a front tooth; Squatwiggle had a thatch of dark hair and, this morning, a scratch over one eye. They worked together easily, only occasionally squabbling over whose go in the game it was. It was kind of them to be there, trying to keep her mind off of the kidnappers on the other side of the room, and kind of Gobber, whose idea to bring them it must have been. Even their bickering had a steadying effect on her.

Then Stoick called her name, summoning her, and she crossed with the utmost dignity. When she stood midway between the chained men and Stoick and his people Hiccup stopped her with his hands on her shoulders, biting the inside of his cheek as the kidnappers laughed and jeered. Merida grinned and pointed at where she stood to show she understood to stay there.

Hiccup asked a question, waving one hand toward the kidnappers and then backing away toward his father, one hand on his chest. Everyone stared as she stood there. Were they giving her a choice? Was it really that easy? Did any of them really think it was a choice, between the men who'd taken her from her home and treated her as little more than plunder, and the people who had saved her, warmed her, fed her, clothed her, taught her? From the look on Hiccup's face the stupid boy must have actually feared that she'd choose the kidnappers, and she held in a sigh. There wasn't a sane womanâ€"personâ€"in the world who wouldn't pick him and his ilk over the scoundrels.

Just because she wasn't going with them didn't mean she couldn't give them a message, though; she ignored shocked gasps and triumphant cheers alike as she stepped toward the chained men. One of them, a man she recognized as one of the leaders, leered up at her as she stopped. Having three disgusting brothers had taught her more than one thing and she worked up a decent gob of spit, releasing it squarely between his feet.

There were a few chuckles as she turned and went straight to Stoick to kneel at his feet. She never would have dreamed of kneeling to any man but her father, but it seemed these people needed proof of her allegiance for as long as she was in this land. Stoick gave her a kind, fatherly smile, lifted her gently and put an arm around her shoulder. Then he spoke to Hiccup and her both; she curtsied to Stoick before Hiccup led her from the hall, Toothless leaping after them at Hiccup's whistle and the apprentices following with cheers.

She sighed quietly; next to her Hiccup looked so relieved that she felt almost insulted. He deserved the punch she landed on his arm. When he protested, rubbing his arm, she vented her frustration. "I know that you are not half as daft as you seem to think you are. As if I would choose to go with a bunch of louts like that! The way they were making fun of your father, like they're better than him—anywhere near as good as him. And you! 'Oh, who'll she pick, I've no idea'! You great numpty."

He rolled his eyes a little when she'd finished and muttered something sarcastic. That called for another thump. He gave a grandiose bow and hopped sideways, laughing, when she tried to deal him a third thump.

He sent the boys racing off in different directions, then walked with her and Toothless to a stone-walled ring set into the ground and covered with a web of chains. It was clearly some kind of training area; there were targets on the walls, at least one of them with an ax still embedded in it. He tugged it out and she said, "Going to give it a toss, then?" Her dad had never taught her to use the ax; he could just get away with her having a bow and training her with a sword, but axes were well outside the bounds. Hiccup gave her a doubtful look and she nodded back encouragingly. He didn't make it look as effortless as Dad did, but Hiccup's aim was decent and his arm easily strong enough to bury the ax in the wood. She teased him when he looked back, mimicking his earlier expression, and he stuck his tongue out in response.

From the top of the wall Wart called down, displaying the bow and quiver, and Hiccup answered. How could he have thought she would pick the kidnappers when he did things like this for her? "Thank you," Merida said, one arm wrapped around his neck. She ran to the entrance of the ring, happily taking the bow from Wart. "Aren't you the loveliest thing?" she cooed to it, not caring if they thought she was mad.

Squatwiggles handed her the quiver, which she took gladly, and tried to hand her a bun, which she refused with a shake of her head and a tapping finger against the bowstring. Hiccup smiled and gestured to the arena before leaving to sit at the top and watch with the others. Having an audience didn't bother her; nothing could bother her now,

not with her safety in the village secured and a bow to shoot.

Before she entered the ring she rolled up the loose sleeves of the dress and pulled back her hair. Astrid and the others girl had had their hair bound; maybe if she did the same, anyone passing by would take her seriously as an archer. She didn't care if they took her seriously as anything else, but they'd have to acknowledge her skill. Once in the middle of the ring she drew smoothly and released, over and over, every arrow another knot inside her undone. When every arrow was lodged in a target she smiled, circling the ring and gathering them. The ring of targets didn't pose much of a challenge. Now, if she were moving...

"Toothless!" He looked down and then came when she beckoned, more out of curiosity than obedience. "I have an idea," she told him, scratching his head. "May I ride on your back and practice that way? Just running, mind, not flying." He dropped to the ground to let her climb on and waited while she adjusted her skirt, pulling it higher than her mother would consider acceptable, and the quiver.

"Ready when you are," she said, poking him gently with her heels out of habit.

This was more like it, even if he wasn't made for running the way a horse was, and it took her a moment to adjust to his gait. Toothless looked back as she laughed and encouraged him to go faster. The first arrow was wide of the center, the next closer, and soon she was hitting bull's-eyes every time. When she ran out of arrows he slowed down and she slumped forward, lying along his back, arms spread wide around his neck. Eventually he gave up and lay down himself, giving her the chance to dismount, but she stayed, eyes closed and smiling, pleased.

Merida heard the sound of the boys running and tugging arrows out of the targets. Hiccup's footsteps approached, the odd sound of a boot and a metal foot on the sand; Toothless snorted, and then the footsteps stopped by where she lay. Hiccup asked a question ending in her name and she smiled, opening her eyes to see him there, looking up at her. He said something and leaned against the dragon's side, arms crossed easily, ready to help.

"That was perfect. Thank you," she told Toothless, stroking his side. She sat up, swung one leg over his back, and pushed to slide down, feeling dizziness whirl through her head. The moment her feet touched the ground she faltered, instinctively reaching out with her free hand to steady herself. Her hand landed on his arm and closed around it as she shut her eyes, waiting for the feeling to pass.

When he said something, his voice amused and close, she wasn't sure the feeling was entirely caused by the riding in circles.

## 7. Chapter 7

That evening Stoick answered the door after they'd finished eating and Fishlegs came in, greeting them by name. He and Hiccup talked and he showed what he'd brought: a book, thick pages of smooth wood held together with twists of twine. It was the kind of book she'd used to

first teach the boys their letters. He put the book on the tabletop in front of her and she flipped it open, revealing a cheerful duck.

Fishlegs pulled a page from where it was tucked in the back of the book and produced a stick of charcoal. "\_Ã-nd\_", he said, pointing, then scribbled something on the page as she repeated it. After a few times he pointed at her and listened intently as she said, "Duck." He added something to his page in a separate column. Maybe the first was his word and the second hers, so that they could have a dictionary to consult when they needed to talk about things like water birds.

Fishlegs was humbly pleased when Hiccup voiced approval. She turned the page and said "Cat!" before Fishlegs had even written down his word and he laughed, gesturing for her to slow down. She chortled and watched over his arm as he drew a series of intersecting straight lines, saying "\_Kottr\_" when he was done. She repeated it after him and then with exaggerated slowness, said, "Cat." He nudged her playfully and she elbowed him back, and they turned the page.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup was leaned over, adjusting Toothless' harness, when she came back from changing clothes. Toothless was already saddled, the red tail fin attached; Stoick was already outside. Hiccup had explained the night before, via the sketchbook, that the kidnappers would be flown to an island somewhere and left. She hadn't been sorry to hear that, and had even doodled a little ship to make sure they wouldn't be able to sail away anytime soon. He'd shaken his head and drawn a barrel of water, a pile of bread, and one little knife on the island. He'd looked askance at her then, as if trying to gauge her reaction, and she wondered if maybe she should have forgiven them and begged for mercy on their behalf. She couldn't believe that that was what her mum meant when she talked about being compassionate, though. Until she was safely home in DunBroch, Merida would be happiest knowing that at least some of the men who'd taken her were stranded far away. She hadn't wanted to meet his eye, worried that he would be disappointed at her lack of charity. After a moment of watching her, he had turned to a fresh page and drawn a curly-haired stick-girl firing a bow. She'd sighed in mock-exasperation and stolen the charcoal to draw a stick-boy riding a dragon, and he'd protested and taken the charcoal back to fix the details of Toothless' wings, grumbling. She'd smiled watching him.<p>

Now she walked down to the great hall with Hiccup, Toothless between them. They brought the kidnappers out and paraded them down to the docks in their chains. At the end of the dock, where their only option would be to jump into the water and after they'd been tied securely with rope and blindfolded, Gobber removed their chains; a huge red-orange dragon rose above them and grasped the ropes in its talons, lifting them off the ground. The villagers cheered mockingly as the kidnappers swayed away. Stoick followed on a wide-mouthed dragon with a sack on its back; finally Toothless, a barrel of water suspended under him from a sling over his back, took off. She watched them go silently, straight-faced. Fishlegs tried to get her to leave, to go back to the great hall or somewhere, but she shook her head. She'd watch until they were out of sight; she had to make sure they were gone.

Fishlegs was swinging his legs from atop a barrel when she finally turned away. For the rest of the day he tried to interest her in things: his roly-poly dragon Meatlug, the various workshops and craftspeople. But try as he might, there was nothing to hold her attention. An apologetic expression on her face she patted Fishlegs' arm and made her way up the hill to sit outside the house. He and the dragon followed her, and they sat waiting.

When Stoick and Hiccup returned she looked them over quickly to make sure they were unharmed and generally in the same state they'd left in. She looked up at Stoick for confirmation that they were really gone, for good, and he nodded. Merida exhaled and kissed his hand. It seemed to startle him, but she hoped it would show her gratitude. She was just as surprised when he caught her up and held her close; her arms didn't reach all the way around his neck but she knew he wouldn't drop her. A wave of sadness hit her as she tried to remember the last thing she'd said to her dad and couldn't.

She murmured into his chest, "I don't know how to thank you for all of this. You're so kind and I don't think I can ever repay you." Her eyes were full when he set her down, and his looked teary as well; he coughed and then entered the house, Fishlegs following open-mouthed.

Hiccup chuckled at his friend's face and spoke. He bowed to let her enter first, one hand at his waist but one raised. A tiny smile quirked her lips but she covered it with a huff of breath. Even though he so often seemed serious and burdened with worry, his sense of humor shone through and reminded her that he was still a boy, not a man full-grown. She grabbed his free hand, pulling him into the house with her. Here they were equals, and no one would scold her for holding his hand—"no one (she hoped) would think it anything other than the stranger wanting to feel less alone. She didn't let go until they were at the table and she took a seat.

Fishlegs had maps and charts spread on the table and was showing Stoick a route. The two of them and Hiccup talked, she assumed about a way to get home; as the conversation wore on Fishlegs bowed out, studying his charts, and both Hiccup and Stoick grew a little uncomfortable. Stoick lowered his voice and leaned toward his son, saying something that Hiccup cut off with a mortified hiss. His eyes darted from her to Fishlegs and she really wanted to know what they'd been talking about, because he covered his reddening face with his hands and then hid it against the tabletop altogether. Eventually he sat up and ran his hands over his face and ruffled up his hair, looking suddenly older, and it occurred to Merida that she didn't really know him, any of them, well at all.

Except she did know him. She knew that he'd saved her and protected her from the kidnappers, seemingly for no other reason than that it was the right thing to do. He was stronger than he thought he was, and funny, and kind. She'd never for a moment doubted that she could trust him, that he would help her no matter what. She couldn't decide if her father would lecture her for being too trusting, or tell her to follow her instincts; in the light of her kidnapping she probably should have been more suspicious of people.

She stared at him with a small frown, biting her lip, wondering if she'd made a mistake. Hiccup wasn't looking at her, and his ears were still red as he talked to Stoick. There it was again, the



seriousness, the careful consideration, until his father said something and he smiled, crooked and true. Then she remembered that she'd already chosen who to trust in the village, and there was no sense in changing her mind now.

## 8. Chapter 8

The next few days were a trial for Merida. They were all busy, rushing about trying to prepare, but there was little time for any of them to explain to her what exactly they were doing, or how she could help. More than once she nearly lost her last shred of patience when she was brushed aside by a well-meaning male with no time to sit down and explain where he was going.

Even if they wouldn't share the particulars, she could deal with what she needed. She made her way to Gobber's shop and managed to request more arrowheads, and then Gobber saw to it that the woodworker supplied the fletched shafts. After a brief exchange where they both drew in the dirt with a stick, Gobber also helped her find a waterproof bag big enough for her bow and quiver. She carefully cleaned and packed her few clothes in another bag, and then tried to help as best she could with whatever else seemed to need doing.

In the evenings they worked on the dictionary. Animals were forgotten in favor of the directions, weather, hills and rivers, and basic commands. They both mastered "stop," "stay," "come," and "run" in the other's language, along with a few more commands; she didn't want to think about the kinds of situations that might require some of those words. She was trying to draw a flooded river and Hiccup was criticizing her depiction when Stoick presented her with a package, saying something and sounding a tad embarrassed about it. She pulled at the twine holding it all together; when the wrapping was out of the way she saw a tunic in a paler version of the color of Toothless' eyes. Beneath it was one in blue, then a tough, short skirt, two pairs of close-fitting brown trousers, a belt, and a pair of boots. They were clothes like Astrid wore, clothes suited for adventuring. She rushed up the stairs to try them on, more excited now than she had been since she'd first learned she was going home.

Where had he gotten them? she wondered as she pulled the dress over her head. She held the trousers up for a moment, considering them—she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen anyone back home in trousers, let alone a woman, and she chuckled as she imagined Maudie's reaction to seeing her in them, and then she laughed giddily at the fact that she would see Maudie soon, and her family. The trousers were snug; she'd never worn anything that hugged her legs this way before, and it might take a moment of getting used to. Next she pulled on the skirt, then one of the tunics, and wrapped the belt around her waist. She wished there was a mirror so she could see what she looked like. She twisted and lunged and would have done a cartwheel if there'd been enough room to. It was so easy to move without long skirts tangling up her legs. She slipped her feet into the boots and ran down the stairs. Hiccup, Stoick, and Fishlegs looked up as she rejoined them; the looks on their faces were mirror enough to tell her how she looked, and Hiccup swallowed quickly.

"I love them," she said, spinning across the room toward the men. "But my mother would hate you for giving them to me." She gave Stoick a kiss on the cheek in thanks before sitting down again.

The day of their departure she woke early, all nerves, and dressed in the grey light. Her sack of clothes was packed; her bow, quiver of arrows, and extra string in the waterproof bag were laid out, ready to go. She straightened her blankets on the couch and then sat staring around the room, the house that had been her home. There was a twinge in her gut that said she would miss this place, so she took her time memorizing it.

At the dock Hiccup checked his things again until Gobber whacked him lightly on the head. Hiccup hugged Fishlegs briefly, and then Merida wrapped her arms around his middle. He'd been so helpful the whole time; she squeezed him hard to show her thanks. He was blushing when she let go, but smiling, too.

The apprentice boys came forward and Wart held out a small bundle, saying something to which Squawwiggle added as she unwrapped the bit of linen. It was a knife in a leather scabbard; there was a brilliant sun on one side of the scabbard and a group of small stars on the other, and when she pulled out the knife a dragon blew fire down the length of the blade. It was a wonderful present. She remembered that when they'd first met the boys had been working on making knives, and realized that they had probably made this one for her. She smiled at them, her chin trembling, and pulled them to her, kissing their cheeks. Like boys everywhere they made noises and tried to get away, but she knew it was just for show. Gobber gave her a smile and a nod that she returned before she let the boys go.

Then she turned to Stoick, towering over her with a fond smile. Her sadness at leaving was tempered by the excitement of knowing that she'd been going to see her own father again, but that didn't mean she wouldn't miss him. She jumped and he caught her, and she snuggled against him. "Be safe and happy," she said quietly. "I hope you know how grateful I truly am. I owe you my life."

He wiped away tears and she turned to board the boat, leaving Hiccup and Stoick to their goodbyes. When the ship was untied and pulling away from the dock, she stood with Hiccup at the stern staring back at Berk. From land Stoick watched as they left. Too soon he disappeared from sight and she felt sadness mingled with growing hope.

\* \* \*

><p>These days at sea were infinitely better than those she'd had before. The sailors sometimes sang as they rowed, and they let her have a go at an oar; years of archery had strengthened her arms, though she wasn't quite ready to take to a life at sea. Sometimes she clung to the prow, not so much watching for land as allowing the fresh air to rush past her. Toothless and Hiccup took short flights, racing ahead of the ship, diving for fish that they brought back for cooking on the small fire.<p>

One day, as the two of them flew beside the ship, one of the sailors caught her attention with a "\_Psst\_." In one hand he had a coil of rope; in the other, a little round boat, which he dropped over the side. Then he lifted her into it, giving her one end of the rope. The other he tossed at Toothless' stomach. The dragon caught it automatically, with a glance down to where it ended in her hands. She smiled and nodded, expecting him to take up the slack and tow her

along.

She was not expecting him to shoot forward in a burst of speed. The rope went taut in her hands and she followed it with a shriek, straight out of the boat and into the water with a splash.

It was cold. She broke the surface, pushing hair out of her face and laughing. Hiccup leaned over Toothless' side to look down at her, relieved and exasperated, and Toothless rose until she was hanging in the air. She hoped he wouldn't put her back in the ship; she wanted another try with the boat. She could get it right this time, if she braced herself and wrapped the rope around the seat. To her delight, he lowered her into the little boat, despite Hiccup's shouts of "No" from above. She scowled at him and grinned at Toothless, who clearly knew a good idea when he saw one. When she was secure she nodded up at him and Toothless zoomed ahead, the boat skipping over the waves. She laughed wildly, spray flying into her face.

The sailors clapped when he finally deposited her, grinning, on deck, and she hugged Toothless in thanks. Even Hiccup couldn't manage to look as annoyed as he probably felt he should. He took in her dripping clothes and hair still plastered to her head and admonished her before turning away to fetch a blanket for her to dry off with. She was about to thank him nicely when he threw it over her head and started rubbing. It was the same way Dad dried his hounds if he ever had to wash them, and she yelpedâ€"not because it was painful, but because what came after would be if he didn't stop soon. All of her protests were muffled by the blanket, though, so she was forced to resort to more physical measures. He dropped his arms when she hit him in the stomach.

It was too late. Wind and salt and his help had created a thicket of tangles. She glared evilly at him, watching his eyes go wide as he made some smart remark. Well, if he'd messed it up, he could fix it. Without a word she stomped to her bag and pulled out the combâ€"not his mother's but one she'd gotten from the woodworker's shop; he'd let her have it just so she would go awayâ€"then stomped back to sit in front of him, blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She thrust the comb into the air, twisting to glare up at him when he didn't take it immediately.

Hiccup worked gingerly, not wanting to hurt her. That made it hard to be mad at him, though she managed it for a while longer. Maybe now he'd know that touching her hair was not to be undertaken lightly. She ignored his grumbling and the laughter of the crew as he worked, closing her eyes and tilting her face to catch the sun. Neither her mum nor the maids went as easy on her hair as he did; they knew she had a tough scalp. His gentleness was sweet, though.

It took quite a while before he was finished. He threw himself onto the deck, his hands clasped together around the comb on his chest, and moaned piteously, grimacing.

"Now you know," she said, patting his hands and taking the comb. She ran it through her hair: he'd done a fair job of a difficult situation. Hiccup watched her as she braided her hair. The poor boy really hadn't had any idea. When she looked over at him his eyes were closed, squinting slightly against the sun; he looked peaceful, his hair falling against his forehead. She pushed the hair back and he sighed, his breath warm against her wrist.

## 9. Chapter 9

On the morning of the ninth day—or maybe the tenth, she wasn't entirely sure—the captain shouted and the men dropped their oars, rolling their shoulders. Nothing around them looked any different, still the sea and horizon in all directions, but this was where they'd leave from. Merida pulled her harness over her head, wiggling into it before climbing onto Toothless' back. Hiccup connected the straps to her harness and then climbed up in front of her; he twisted to check the straps again and she swatted at him. When they were situated the sailors gave them their sacks. The captain wished them luck and Toothless took off, rising with a whoosh of wings, and Merida waved down to the sailors as they disappeared.

With nothing to look at and nowhere to move to, the flight was dull. Toothless mainly flapped steadily at something less than full speed, sometimes catching air currents and surfing them down, but mainly it was all the same. Though she wasn't tired she fell asleep, just to pass the time; when she woke none of the scenery had changed and Hiccup was leaning forward, staring at the spots on Toothless' back. She wished they could play a game or even talk, but neither was an option. The idea that she was stuck in the sky with nowhere to go and no ability to even more began to make her itch all over.

Just when she thought she would start pulling her hair out, something on the horizon caught her eye. She squinted across the distance, hoping she hadn't started to see things. She rubbed at her eyes and looked again; it was still there. "Hiccup!" she said, shaking him. He shook his head and sat up, looking back at her, and she leaned over his shoulder and pointed. Toothless didn't change speed, only nodded his head when Hiccup spoke, but Merida felt better than she had since they'd left the ship.

She leaned against Hiccup's shoulder and watched the land as it grew nearer, until the sun set and there was nothing left to see. Toothless landed unerringly, though, and she slipped down and stood by while Hiccup removed his saddle and Toothless dropped to the ground, rolling a bit. While Hiccup fed the dragon she looked around, trying to see if there was anything she recognized, but the twilight was already too dark.

Hiccup set everything near Toothless' head and then walked back and lifted up one wing, gesturing for her to crawl under it. She lay down, the ground beneath cool and damp, but Toothless warm against her. When Hiccup lowered the wing it folded gently over her, acting as a blanket. She should have offered to stay on guard, but even as she thought it she was already nodding off.

She woke suddenly, sitting up to find her face damp and Toothless nowhere to be found. She whipped her head around, unconscious terror coursing through her. Where was she? Why was she alone? The racing slowed when she heard Hiccup's voice, dryly greeting her as he tossed her a waterproof cloak. Toothless returned with both their breakfast and the means to cook it, and when they'd eaten she felt more awake and vaguely less full of fear and hatred.

It was a wretched day. They walked endlessly over the hills, a light mist always in their faces. Merida felt exposed on the treeless land,

and it made her tetchy, had her clutching the hood down tight over her head as they squelched along. Every so often a seabird would call overhead, and rabbits scampered away from them, but no one spoke. They continued as far south as they could, out onto a promontory from which they could see another island in the distance. Toothless voiced her displeasure by snorting and turning away. He breathed fire onto the ground and settled in the now-dryâ€or drierâ€area. She stared at him, numb with exhaustion, cold and wet, and couldn't even step forward. Hiccup took her arm and pulled her to the dragon, huddling under the wing next to her; she'd remember to thank him in the morning.

\* \* \*

><p>Island after island and day after day they traveled on. Toothless slowly regained his strength, flying a little longer. After a nearly a week they were flying for a while and then walking, and they'd left the islands and then the coast behind in favor of the forested inland. Among the trees she finally felt comfortable enough to pull the hood off. When they made camp Toothless would light a fire and Hiccup would tend it while she and the dragon hunted for food. Mostly they found rabbits and freshwater fish, though one day at twilight Toothless froze. Ahead of him, browsing tranquilly in the underbrush, was a red deer. The dragon looked at her, flicking his wide-eyed gaze from her to the bow to the deer. She drew as quietly as she could and fired, hitting the deer squarely and letting out a little cheer as it fell.<p>

They crossed to where the deer lay, and only now that it was dead did Merida wonder how they would get it back to the camp. "Can you carry it back?" she asked. Toothless shook his head, stretching his wings as far as he could; the trees were too thick around them to allow him to rise. He could carry it across his back, though. He lay down on his side next to the deer and she managed to drag it, slowly and laboriously, until two of its legs were over his shoulders; then he rolled over and she pushed and together they got it onto his back. She was sweating and dirty by the time they made it back to the camp, but it was worth it.

\* \* \*

><p>Two days later they returned to camp to find Hiccup asleep against a tree. Merida dressed the rabbit as Toothless went looking for fish in the stream; when the rabbit was on a spit over the fire she picked up the sketchbook that had fallen from Hiccup's lap onto the ground next to him. She took it nearer the fire so she could watch their dinner. The book had been open to one of the maps and she studied it, trying to find where they were, then flipped through the pages to search for their current location on one of them. None of them really helped, though, so she turned back to the more recent drawings and abruptly stopped.<p>

Behind her Hiccup made a noise that she ignored as she stared at the portrait. There was no other word for it. Even from his little sketches she'd known that he was a good artist, but she hadn't realized how good until this. The young woman in the picture was beautiful. She wore a dress embroidered at the hem and her hair was plaited and hung over her shoulder, shining in the light. Her bow was planted in the ground at her feet and she leaned her weight on it, one hip cocked. Though she wasn't exactly smiling, she looked happy

as she gazed at something far away. This young woman looked like a princess, through and through.

Merida bit her lip as she considered the drawing. Was this how she looked? She hadn't thought she was unattractive, but she'd never thought she was this lovely. She stroked a fingertip down the girl's cheek, wondering if this was how he really saw her. The possibility of it felt like a cold flame inside her, and she had to see his face. He looked startled when she turned suddenly. His eyes were on her, searching her expression; he looked hopeful and expectant and her heart swelled with a new joy.

She dropped her eyes to the picture one last time before carefully closing the sketchbook. She stood, hoping her shaking wasn't evident, though she felt it to her bones, and crossed the few steps to him to lay the book gently in his lap. His fingers closed around the edges of the book and he watched her closely as she knelt on the ground at his feet. She pressed her fingers to her lips and said, "Big," laying her hand over his heart, and met his gaze shyly; his lips were slightly parted and his eyes were shadowed. When she couldn't stay there anymore without doing something that would embarrass her mother she stood and returned to the fire, taking a spit of meat from where it cooked. She handed it to Hiccup and sat down next to him, the tree at her back and a warmth filling her that had nothing to do with the fire.

## 10. Chapter 10

They struck camp and walked in the morning, stretching after another night of sleeping on the hard ground. Merida missed her bed in the castle; she even missed the couch in Berk. If they kept up this pace, they'd be sleeping in DunBroch soon. She smiled at the thought, and flushed when she caught Hiccup watching her. There was a knowledge in his glance that hadn't been there before, and it made her skin crawl in a pleasurable way.

Merida studied the forest around them as they walked, half to try to orient herself and half to keep from staring at him. The pines around them felt familiar—*not* as familiar as the ones surrounding the castle, the ones she could walk through with her eyes closed, but homey. They were getting close; she felt confident thinking so, even though she still didn't know exactly where they were. Maybe there was a chance they'd make it into the territory of an allied clan. They'd have to help, or at the very least welcome the princess and her companions, feed them well and give them shelter for a night or two—*no*, just one: no sense in dawdling when they were so close. Of course, she'd have to make sure none of them tried to kill Toothless. She could just imagine Lord Dingwall trying to convince visitors that he'd killed an actual dragon, and giggled to herself.

Ahead Toothless suddenly veered off the path, sniffing the air. Hiccup followed him and she followed Hiccup. Toothless was as curious as a cat sometimes, and she wondered what he was after this time. The dragon stopped at the base of a tree, nosing at a fallen beehive, but Merida stayed back. She'd been stung enough times in her life already, and this journey did not need the added adventure of being attacked by flying insects.

Besides, a strangely familiar noise was coming from the bushes not

far from Toothless. She took a step forward, face screwed up as she tried to remember where she knew it from. It had just come to her when a little brown head peeked out of the greenery, looking around fearfully. "Oh, no," she whispered, freezing in place, her heart sinking. \_Not here. Not now. Please, let us walk away before she comes back. \_

\_Please don't make me shoot someone's mother. \_

Hiccup turned back to ask her a question and paused at the look on her face, following her gaze to spot the cubs. "Toothless," he said quietly, backing away, and Toothless turned his head, but toward the squeaking in the underbrush. She wanted to scream at him to move, to come away while there was still time, but screaming would draw the mother's attention. There was still a chance that they could make it out unharmed.

The mother bear roared forward and Merida did scream then, trying to warn Toothless as Hiccup backed toward her, as if he could do anything to defend them from the animal. Toothless fought back, on his hind legs with wings spread wide, and the bear hesitated, confused by the strange opponent.

Without thinking she stepped around Hiccup and drew her bow. If Toothless would just stay out of the way she could stop it, stop this. She could put an arrow through its eye and kill it—it was a perfectly normal bear that could be killed by normal means. Every time she had a shot, though, Toothless stepped into it, and she couldn't risk hitting him. That would be even worse than killing the bear.

He was faster than the bear, but more importantly, he was smarter. Toothless led the bear to attack one direction and moved the other, stepping behind her and letting out an ear-rending screech. Then he lunged toward them, getting his claws around the both of them and hauling them away. Merida saw the mother bear shake her head to clear it and lower her muzzle to her cubs, snuffling over them.

Toothless dropped them just before he fell to the ground himself, skidding over the ground, slamming through saplings and bushes. Even before he'd stopped moving Hiccup was running to his side, shouting his name.

It was like a bad dream. Toothless, strong, quick, feisty Toothless, was covered in gashes from the bear's claws; when Hiccup gingerly pulled out one wing there was a vicious scratch across it. Toothless was breathing hard and Hiccup was gasping, too, his voice cracking as he talked. For a moment he put his forehead against the dragon's side, murmuring thanks, though she didn't know for what.

Merida brought water to clean the wounds and tore a shirt for rags, not caring that it was one that Stoick had gotten her. After that there was nothing more she could do for them; she knew nothing about dragon health, but she knew how even tame animals sometimes turned on their handlers when they were injured. She didn't want to get in the way; it'd be quicker and easier if she waited and let Hiccup call if he needed anything. It left her at a loss for what to do, though. \_You can keep watch\_, she thought, or her father did for her; \_you can protect them the way they've protected you. \_She sat with her bow at the ready, staring out into the forest as the others suffered

together. When Hiccup walked away, she pretended she didn't hear him crying, though she ached with the want to comfort him, to help somehow.

There was no sense in going hungry, and Toothless especially would need something to eat. Hiccup returned to sit by Toothless and she rose, going to the stream and to spear some fish. She gave them to Hiccup, taking in his red-rimmed eyes with a pang, and while he fed Toothless she returned to the stream and gathered leaves and berries. At any other time she'd be excited that she recognized the plants, as it meant they were getting close; she would have run back, cupped hands full, to share with him. Now she worked automatically, trying not to think as she made a stew with some of the leftover venison, feeling his eyes on her. When the stew was ready she gave it to Hiccup without a word. He ate and then turned his back on her to sleep, curled up at the dragon's side as she sat armed and watching.

Even knowing that he considered Toothless his best friend, that he was more family than pet, it stung. Especially after the night before, when they'd changed into something different, she thought, or had at least started to. \_Compassion, Merida\_, she scolded herself as she retrieved the rest of the stew once he was asleep, finishing it because she ought to, not because she felt like eating. \_This is not the time for your feelings to be hurt, not when someone he cares about is actually hurt. When Toothless is better you can go back to your flirting, \_if\_ he still wants a girl who couldn't shoot a bear to save his best friend.\_

"Ah, shut it," she muttered angrily, closing her eyes.

\* \* \*

><p>It was no surprise she woke in a foul mood, nor that he was up before her. She'd slept badly, cold and uncomfortable and angry and sad and worried, and the guilty look on his face wasn't helping anything. Sometime in the night she'd convinced herself that nothing had happened between the two of them, that she'd been foolish to think they were anything more than friends; when she woke her eyes felt puffy and hot, like she'd been crying. She refused to believe she had. The very idea of it made her still more angry.<p>

Hiccup joined her on her side of the fire, pot and rag in hand, and dabbed at her face with a bit of wet cloth. Like she couldn't take care of herself, like she was some baby. She leaned away, scowling, hoping he would leave her be, but he didn't. Finally she'd had enough and snapped "Stop," pushing at his shoulder. If it was so important that she have a clean face, out here in the middle of nowhere, she'd do it herself. She stalked to the creek and scrubbed, hoping to get rid of any sign of tears.

"Hope this is clean enough for you," she muttered, splashing cold creek water on her face. "I'd hate to ruin your breakfast with my slovenliness."

When she returned he was seated on a log and patted the wood next to him, wanting her to join him. He seemed contrite, but she was stubborn; he wouldn't get back in her good graces just by smiling a little and, and&e|\_tending to her the way he had to Toothless, bathing what was wounded.\_ She ignored the sidewise hop in her chest



at that and sat, far from him and still scowling. \_He's treated me like a dog, like a dragon, like a...\_

She stiffened at the feeling of his fingers gently removing debris from her hair, then combing through it. \_Like a doll\_, she huffed to herself, though it lacked any real force and she felt her body relaxing in spite of her mind's objections. His fingers caught on a knot that she would have just tugged out, but he slowed; his hands moved as deftly as a weaver's at a loom.

He could hurt her, she realized. She'd watched his hands as he threw an ax, punched holes in leather, pulled at an oar; he could easily do her harm, especially when she was unarmed and at his mercy like this. There came no fear with the realization, though, because on its heels followed the knowledge that while he could, he wouldn't. He would never put her in danger, least of all from himself; he would shield her from harm—he had done already, more than once. However he cared for her, it was at least that much. He finished combing and gathered the hair into bunches, trying to plait it, and she softened further. Of course he would.

When he'd finished he sat next to her. She couldn't try to ignore him now and she didn't want to so she turned, their knees brushing. He apologized—though she couldn't understand all of it, it must have been an apology; it was in his face and his voice and the way he said her name. She nodded, not doubting for a second that he'd said what he should. He looked battered and tired, and she wouldn't prolong his suffering any longer. She could at least do that. She put her arms around him, tucking her head against his neck and hoping it gave him some comfort.

With his face in his hair and his arms secure around her she thought, \_He treats me like a treasure\_.

## 11. Chapter 11

Having to wait for Toothless to feel well enough to move again was starting to wear on Merida by the second morning. Though she and Hiccup were getting on again, the time spent not moving closer to home rankled, just a bit. She swore she heard an eagle cry overhead and it buzzed through her like a shock. When she woke on the third day to see Toothless sitting up and Hiccup packing, she grinned.

It was another day of walking, a night of sleeping hard, and a morning of walking again before she knew they were close. Then it was all she could do to keep from running outright. Every mile they walked it became more and more obvious that they were nearing her home. She tried to walk slowly, taking exaggeratedly small steps, pausing between footfalls, but the tactics only worked for a short time before she was back to striding quickly. The others kept up as best as they could as she stared around her, at the landmarks of rocks and trees that marked the way.

Then they walked into a clearing that couldn't have been more familiar if it were her own bedroom. "The stones!" she cried, running to the nearest one and leaning against it, arms as far around it as they could reach, the rough surface scraping lightly against her cheek. Hiccup joined her, peering up at the stones where they were topped with mist; she stopped him before he stepped into the circle.

"Magic," she explained reverently, hand closed around his. Then she pushed away from the stone and led him on the path toward home. "Come," she said. Toothless loped after them as they hurried forward.

It wasn't until they were nearly out of the forest that she remembered that one of their company was a dragon. She stopped them with a hiss and backed them up with hands raised, into the trees where they couldn't be seen. Then she pointed behind them, her face alight, explaining, "DunBroch." Toothless looked past her, cheered by the fact that they were near the end of their journey; Hiccup watched her, his expression guarded, for some reason the least pleased of any of them.

"Wait here," she said. "I've got to warn them about the dragon. Otherwise my dadâ€"Fergus might try to kill Toothless. Stay." She pointed with a grin, nearly hopping in her excitement; without waiting for a response she turned and tore through the trees.

Her heart was pounding as she ran, pelting toward the castle. "It's me!" she called, panting. "I'm back! Mum! Dad! Boys!"

For the first time in her life a guard at the gate stopped her. "Halt!" he cried, then peered at her when she did, hands clutching her sides. "Princess Merida?"

She nodded; in her new outfit, hair flying out of a braid, she didn't blame him for looking twice. "Where are my parents?" she gasped.

"King Fergus rode down to the crofts, but the queen is here." Merida waved her hand and the guard turned and shouted. "It's the princess! Fetch the queen!"

Returned home or not, she couldn't have her mother catching her hunched over at her own gate. She straightened, blowing out a breath. "May I go in?"

"Oh! Beg pardon, Your Highness. We've been on extra duty ever since you went missing." He stood aside to let her pass through the gates.

Everything was the sameâ€"why wouldn't it be? Just because she was a bit different didn't mean the castle would be. "Mum!" she called, hurrying toward the great hall, and when that didn't have an effect, "\_Elinor!\_"

Servants were joining in the shouting now, though most of them were yelling her name, not her mother's. Before she reached the hall the queen exited, looking around with a furrowed brow. "What is all this shouting about?" she asked, hands on her hips, and Merida stumbled forward out of the crowd, her eyes filling with tears.

"Mum."

"Merida?" her mother gasped.

"Mum!" She threw herself forward, arms outstretched to embrace her. Her mother's arms wrapped tightly around her, vise-like; the ability

to breathe seemed unimportant at this point. As long as she did so at home, she'd happily suffocate.

"Oh, Merida, my darling girl. I thought we'd lost you." Tears and kisses dropped onto Merida's hair and face.

"I was kidnapped and they were going to try to get a ransom from Dad but then there was a storm. And I escaped and then Hiccup and Toothless found me and brought me home."

"Oh, love, you're here now. That's all that matters. We'll have time to hear all about it later." She started to lead Merida into the hall, but Merida resisted.

"Mum, you have to come with me. I have to show you something. Where's Angus?"

"Merida, what are you talking about?" She put a hand on Merida's cheek, looking into her eyes with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I promise. Please just come with me. You have to seeâ€"I'll show you the reason I'm fine, and the reason I'm here and not lying dead somewhere." Her mother's face trembled at the word dead and she felt a pang at the pain there, at the fact that her mother had likely thought her dead more than once. "Mum, please. We'll come right back. But I have to go, with or without you."

Elinor looked at her hard, worry still etched on her features, but nodded. "Bring the horses," she commanded, and someone rushed off, returning in a moment leading her mum's horse and hers.

"Angus!" He whinnied happily, butting his head against her. "Oh, Angus." She leaned against his nose, inhaling the scent of horsehair and straw before a groom helped her onto Angus' back.

They galloped back toward the wood, stopping on the edge, where Merida turned to Elinor. "The people who helped meâ€"my friends are just in there. Erm...when they come out, don't be scared."

"Merida, did something happen?" Her mother's voice was choked. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm home, Mum. I'm grand." She smiled encouragingly, then turned back toward the wood and raised her voice. "Hiccup! Toothless!" She turned to her mother and added, "Oh, and they don't speak our language, so don't expect any answers to your questions."

They took just long enough for Elinor to seriously doubt her daughter's sanity. As the two emerged she saw them as her mother must: a young man oddly dressed and dirty, one metal leg and a wary, determined expression on his face; next to him, alert and cautious, a black creature instantly recognizable from fairy stories as a dragon. Her mum gasped and Merida laughed quietly. Hiccup smiled then, revealing the teasing boy, and her mum cocked her head.

Hiccup paused briefly; then he dropped the bags of their things and bowed, not a hint of mockery in it. Toothless' glance flicked to him and then he too bowed, chest close to the ground and head lowered. Elinor's eyes widened a fraction in surpriseâ€"she clearly hadn't

been expecting deference from the pair, and especially not the dragon"but she nodded graciously.

Merida motioned to each of them in turn as she said, "Elinor, Hiccup, Toothless." As the others nodded to each other, Angus tossed his head, feeling left out, and she laughed and patted his neck. "And Angus." Toothless sniffed toward the horse. After they were introduced Merida stuck her hand out to Hiccup. "\_Koma\_", she urged him. He could ride back with her, saving Toothless the effort. But he looked doubtfully up at Angus as Toothless' lip curled back in the tiniest sneer; then he threw the bags over the dragon's back and mounted.

They rode back in silence, walking to accommodate Toothless. She had so much to explain to her parents, from the clothes to the bear to the kidnapping to the dragon; for now she was content to be quiet, her mother holding one hand and Hiccup and Toothless at her other.

When the castle came in sight Hiccup muttered something quietly. He was staring up at the stone walls, the whole thing bigger than any building in Berk, and for the first time she thought about how he must be feeling, in this new place he didn't understand. She could sympathize. \_Courage\_, she thought, hand over her heart to remind him.

## 12. Chapter 12

The crowd that surrounded them was both joyful at her return and terrified of Toothless. The boys tumbled across the courtyard, hollering as they came. Harris climbed on Angus' back and gave her a sticky hug; she squished his face in her hands, kissing his cheek while Hamish started a staring contest with Toothless, and Hubert disappeared for a moment before coming back with a plate of cakes and Maudie in pursuit. True to form she fainted when she saw Toothless. Hubert passed out cakes, one shoved in his own mouth. "Boys!" their mother scolded, and Merida laughed loudly as she swung down from Angus' back. She grabbed Hubert into her arms, not even caring when he got crumbs in her hair.

Then there was a thunder of hooves over the bridge and her dad burst through the gates. "Merida!" he shouted, leaving his horse's back in an ungainly hop.

"Dad," she breathed as he snatched her up, holding her tight. In her father's arms she knew she was really home. Over his shoulder she saw Hiccup staring up at them. "\_Mikill\_", she mouthed down at him, and he smirked.

"Wha's it called?" Hamish asked Hiccup, who stood next to Toothless, one hand on his shoulder; he stared down at the boy, unmoving.

"The dragon's a boy, I think, and he's called Toothless," she said, still in her dad's grip. He put her down and turned; this was the critical moment, when one false move could ruin everything. It was up to her now. She slipped around her dad to stand between him and Hiccup and cleared her throat. \_Enunciate\_. They should be able to hear you from anywhere in the room\_.

With one hand toward Hiccup and Toothless she said firmly, "These are my friends: Hiccup, son of Stoick, chieftain of Berk, and the dragon Toothless. They are the reason, and the only reason, that I am still alive, and the only reason I am safely home. I hope you will welcome them to our kingdom and treat them with the honor they deserve." That ought to do it; the crowd cheered in response and her mum looked proud, while her dad still seemed doubtful.

She turned to her escorts and rather unnecessarily gestured to her dad. "Fergus," she said, briefly, if not formally. A poke in her side reminded her to introduce her brothers as well, and they waved as she said their names. Hiccup and Toothless bowed to Fergus, who, like his wife had done, looked impressed. His eyes went to Hiccup's leg, and Toothless waved his tail to display the replacement fin. Her dad gave a slight nod to them then that cheered Merida.

"Come on, dear, let's go inside," Fergus said, arm around her shoulders. Her mum rested her own arm over the top of his, and they turned together toward the great hall. "Are you all right? Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine, Dad," she said truthfully. In time she could use a good bath, a warm meal, a nap, and a change of clothes, but for the moment all she needed was to be there with her family. The triplets were running over each other on their way, her parents were close, and Hiccup—

Wasn't there. Irrational fear spiked within her for a second as she tried to see him around her parents. She had to stop in her tracks and turn, twisting under their arms, to see him standing with Toothless where she'd left them in the middle of the courtyard. The sight of his face, uncertain, flooded her with relief and affection and exasperation. She reached her hand back toward them. "Hiccup, Toothless, come!" she called, and they came.

Inside the great hall servants rushed to prepare the table for them. "Bring water and food, whatever you've got handy," her dad called. "Is there any of that mutton pie left?"

"Please remember to lay an extra place for our guest," Elinor added. The king escorted her to her chair and then Merida to hers before moving to his own seat as the boys clambered into their chairs opposite hers. Hiccup and Toothless had stopped halfway to the table; she rolled her eyes. Did he not see the empty chair next to her? Did he think someone else would be sitting by her side?

"Hiccup," she sighed. Even Toothless seemed to roll his eyes as made his way to the hearth and lay down there, and her family watched him go. But she watched Hiccup approach, smiling—she couldn't stop herself from smiling if she tried, so happy was she to be home. He slipped into the seat and her parents' attention turned to him.

"Where are you from, then, Hiccup?" her father asked, gruffly.

Hiccup looked to her to explain. "A place called Berk, Dad, where they speak a different language. I can understand a bit of what he says, and he can understand a bit of what we say, but it's not much."

"Then how did you talk?"

"Lots of gestures. Drawing pictures sometimes, too." Next to her Hiccup was eating a piece of bread very slowly.

"Did that dragon fly you all the way here?"

"No, it was too far. We came by ship for a few days and then flew. And walked. A lot."

"But you did ride it?"

Her mum spread her hands. "Fergus, perhaps we could let Merida tell her story from the beginning."

"Right, love." Her dad settled back. He always did love a story.

She wasn't sure how much he'd love this one, as full of danger to her as it was. He reacted to every high and low with barely-contained emotion. Her mother listened quietly, expression carefully composed. The boys didn't stop eating as she talked; if an opportunity for a snack presented itself, they would not let it pass. A few times the food dropped out of their mouths, though, so she knew they were actually paying attention. And Hiccup was watching her closely. He was probably just trying to follow along and see what words he could understand, but his attention made her face redden, and she gestured more broadly to help him along.

He recognized his father's name when she said it, and his gaze dropped for a moment. Her own dad stroked his beard, and not for the first time she wondered what it would be like if the two men met. "But what about his mother?" Elinor asked, and Hiccup shook his head before Merida could answer. Her mum looked at him sadly and Merida went on, to the ship and skipping over the water; even as she spoke she saw the wheels turning in Hamish's head, knowing that he'd figure out a way to recreate the experience somehow. When she described Hiccup combing out the disaster of her hair Elinor's eyes went to him again, like she was trying to read something on his face.

Then she leaned close to Merida and asked, "He hasn't attempted anything \_forward\_, though, has he?"

She'd only just got back and already her mother was trying to embarrass her to death. Her face burned red and she howled "\_Mother!\_" She wouldn't meet Hiccup's eyes, no matter how worried he looked. He turned to her dad, wide-eyed, and shook his head, as if he couldn't imagine attempting anything forward with her, if he even knew what they were talking about. She glared at him, and he looked back, now confused. Then her dad started laughing at the farce of it all. She huffed and went back to the story.

All of the islands, and then the fight with the bear—after what had just happened, it would be best to leave out the part about the portrait. She caught her mum's eye as she related that the mother bear had been trying to protect her cubs. "I never had a clear shot, but even if I had, I don't know that I could have taken it," she admitted. Her dad looked over at where Toothless lay by the fire; she'd known that the fight would impress him, and she hoped it had won Toothless some respect from him.

"That was four days ago. We rested a bit, and then walked the rest of the way here," she finished. Elinor turned to Hiccup, wanting to say something but unable to communicate; in the end she took his hand and squeezed it, smiling tearily, and he smiled in return.

Exhaustion washed over Merida as she finished eating. She just managed to hide a yawn, but her mum noticed. For Hiccup's benefit Elinor indicated the stairs and mimed sleeping, and Merida turned to him. "Hiccup \_koma\_, Toothless \_sitja\_?" she asked. Honestly, she'd felt lucky that her mum had let the dragon indoors; Toothless had the run of the house in Berk, but Elinor didn't live in Berk. It might be pushing it to ask her to allow him in one of the bedrooms.

Hiccup glanced at Toothless and shook his head. She wasn't surprised that he didn't want to leave him behind, but her parents didn't seem to appreciate the idea.

"They're best friends. And Toothless is injured; Hiccup won't leave him alone." She looked back and forth between her mum and dad.

Fergus shrugged. "Then they can both sleep here."

"Fergus!"

"What? We'll put down some rugs and all. He'll be fine."

"We've been sleeping on the ground and in a ship for weeks, Dad. It'd just be cruel not to give him a bed now."

Elinor put her hands on her hips. "Fergus, they are our \_guests\_. They saved our daughter and brought her back to us."

Her dad sputtered helplessly, caught between the need to be hospitable and the desire to protect his family from the strange beast. Finally he threw up his hands and asked, "Is it housetrained?"

"Yes, Dad," she sighed as her mum shook her head.

The queen turned to the pair. "Hiccup, Toothless, \_koma\_," she called, and all of their mouths dropped open. She reached over and closed Fergus' mouth and then Merida's and waved to Hiccup, hurrying him along.

Merida followed them, her mother and Hiccup and Toothless, up the stairs. The odd trio passed her room and carried on down the hall; she leaned on the doorframe, watching them go. Her mum stopped at the end of the hall and pushed open a door, and Merida went into her room.

The tapestry still hung unfinished on the wall; her bow was in the corner. The room had been tidied, dusted and kept clean, but otherwise it was just the same. She sat on her bed and ran her hand over the gashes she'd put in one post. The bed felt too soft under her. Everything was strange—they were all her things and familiar, but now strange at the same time.

She washed in the basin and combed out her hair, picked a dress from

the wardrobe and put it on. If her brothers hadn't changed, and she hoped they hadn't, they'd be at his door now, hoping for a ride from Toothless or to poke at Hiccup. Sure enough they were knocking as she walked down the hall, goggling up at him when he opened the door. "Get away, you terrors, or I can promise you'll never ever get a dragon ride," she said.

The threat worked and they ran off. She peeked in to see Toothless comfortable in a patch of sunlight on the far side of the room, a fire was laid in the hearth but not yet lit. The room was smaller than hers, but it would suit their needs. Hiccup's hair stood on end. She saw the embarrassment on his face as he noted her clean dress and combed hair, and she tsked at him, reaching up to straighten his hair. When he looked more like his normal self she tugged him out into the hall and toward her room, counting doors as they went. She pushed open her door so he could see it belonged to her; then they walked back to his room and she watched him counting the doors between theirs.

Even though she was home, she wasn't sure she'd be able to sleep without him nearby. He'd been the constant thing in her life for weeks, always close, in shouting distance if not in arm's reach; if she shouted from her room she wasn't sure he'd hear her, and the thought made her squirm, for more reasons than one. Outside his door they stopped. She bit her lip as he turned, and just before he went in she said, "Hiccup?"

His arms were around her in an instant and she sighed. It felt like years since they'd touched, though she knew that just that morning they'd left the stone circle with their hands entwined. Her mum's question echoed in her head then. If anything, she'd been the forward one; she'd taken his hand, touched his chest, hugged him countless times, and she'd never thought it wrong. But would her mother agree? Would anyone else in the castle—in the kingdom? With those thoughts in her mind it was no wonder she stepped away when she heard a noise in the corridor. Hiccup backed into his room and bowed, mockingly this time, and unladylike though it was, she stuck her tongue out at him.

### 13. Chapter 13

She hoped no one saw the foolish grin on her face as she wandered back to her room. For once she was at a loss for what to do—she didn't want to leave the castle, didn't even want to leave her room as long as it was where Hiccup thought she was; if he needed her, she wanted to be where he could find her. Maybe a little nap would pass the time, she thought, stripping down to her shift.

Was that a woodpecker? It was still daylight on the other side of her eyelids, so why had she been asleep? She opened her eyes reluctantly to see the canopy of her bed above her and remembered that they'd made it. She was in her room in DunBroch. And the knocking on the door was her mother, not a bird.

"I didn't want you to sleep too long," she said quietly, sitting on the bed next to Merida. She stroked her daughter's hair gently. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, Mum." Elinor was smiling, but there were lines on her face



that Merida didn't remember. "Are you?"

"I'm perfect, darling. Have you had a bath?" She shook her head, eyes closed. "I thought not." Elinor rose and opened the door; a troop of servants came in with a tub, towels, soap, and a long line of buckets of hot water.

"I could have gone down to the big tub," Merida said, eyeing the women emptying buckets into the tub. "It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"No, dear, this is fine." When the servants were gone Merida rolled off the bed and crossed to the tub, sighing at the sight of fluffy towels and steam rising from the water.

"Do you need anything else?" Elinor asked from by the door.

Merida looked up at her. She wouldn't mind being alone, but she didn't want Elinor to leave. "Will you...stay with me, Mum? And talk?"

She smiled, tears in her eyes. "Of course. Whatever you want."

She didn't want to talk herself, not about anything her mum might have wanted to know; she just wanted to hear her mother's voice, to have her there. As Elinor sat down and Merida climbed into the tub she said, "Tell me about the boys. What have they been getting up to?" Then she sat back and listened, reveling in her brothers' antics and her mother's fond exasperation.

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><p>She felt even better when she was all clean and dry, sitting with her back to the fire to dry her hair. When she'd pulled her dress over her head, her mum led her out of the room and toward the stairs.<p>

Merida hung back. "What if Hiccup comes looking for meâ€us?" Not because she wanted to see him; she just didn't want him to be alone and confused in the castle.

Elinor waved her hand, carrying on down the stairs. "Oh, the boys are with him. He'll be fine."

She gawped at her mother's back as they descended and then made their way to a homey sitting room. "The boys, your sons, are with him, and you think he'll be fine."

"He seems like a capable lad, from what you've said." She took a seat on a bench and Merida joined her. "You said his father is the chieftain?"

She nodded. "Stoick is a lot like Dad. I never felt scared of him, even when he was shouting at me."

"And why was he doing that?" Elinor picked up a piece of needlework and started to stitch.

"I was eating his breakfast." She giggled. "I hadn't eaten forâ€two days, I think, at that point. I was a little hungry."

Her mum looked at her then, concern on her face. "Merida, they didn't mistreat you, did they? The kidnappers, that is, not Hiccup and Stoick."

Seeing her mother look like this made her wish she'd never been taken. She'd known that they would be upset, but she hadn't had to see it, and that had made it easier to deal with. Now she had a better idea of what they'd been through, because it was in her mother's shaking hands, her tears, the strain in her voice.

"They never hurt me. They were rudeâ€"you'd have had a thing or two to say to them about their mannersâ€"but they hardly touched me. I would have killed them if they'd tried." She put her hand on Elinor's arm. "I'm all right, Mum. I swear."

Her mum nodded silently, a trembling smile on her lips. They sat quietly for a few minute. Then the unmistakable sounds of her brothers approaching grew louder, and the boys burst into the hall, followed by Hiccup. "Behave yourselves, boys," Elinor tutted; her sons were unaffected, but Hiccup looked at the floor, chastened.

Merida laughed. "Hiccup," she called, waving, and he walked over. He was cleaner than he'd been in weeks; even his hair shone. He wore a kilt, just like her dad and the boys, and she guessed that they'd dressed him, though he moved awkwardly, like he was afraid it would fall off. Mum motioned for him to stop and turn in front of them, and he did, his cheeks crimson. She nodded, and Merida took a closer look at the tartan he wore. It wasn't the same as the one the triplets had on, the DunBroch tartan.

"Mum, is that your clan tartan?"

"Yes. It was handy, and I didn't know if he had any things still clean after that journey of yours." Elinor shrugged, as if she hadn't made a gesture that affirmed her acceptance of him for everyone to see. She could have easily borrowed something from one of the servants, but she'd given him her own family's tartan. Merida hugged her mother fiercely.

"Harris! Hamish! Hubert!" she called. Harris, the closest, flung himself on her, sprawling across her lap; she pointed to the tartan he wore. "DunBroch," she told Hiccup. "Harris, Fergus, Fergus' fatherâ€" And so on, she gestured, for their male ancestors. Then she pushed Harris off of her and stood, touching the fabric crossed over Hiccup's chest. "Elinor," she said, pointing to her mother. He understood then and bowed to the queen, who smiled in return.

She led him to a seat near hers, her hand on his arm. He gave her one of the apples he was carrying and she ate it happily while her mother sewed and they talked. An apple, her home, her family...it was everything she wanted.

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><p>Merida was going to have to have a talk with her mother. All through dinner she'd watched Hiccup as if she expected him to sprout wings. He'd noticed, too; he'd nearly spilled his drink more than once on account of it. What was she looking for? He was acting just

the same as he always had with her. Maybe that was the problemâ€”maybe Mum thought he wasn't being respectful enough to her as a princess. Well, that was just silly. No one respected her more than he did.<p>

"Are you trying to scare him?" she demanded. He'd gone off to bed after dinner, smiling crookedly and bowing before he climbed the stairs.

"What do you mean?"

"Watching him like that, like you think he's going to leap up and run me through." Her parents exchanged glances at that. "You can trust him. \_I\_ trust him. He'll not hurt me."

"We know you think that, dearâ€”"

"I \_know\_ that," she cut in, more sharply than she'd meant to. For weeks she'd been relying on tone to get her point across; now she'd have to remember that people understood her words here.

"But we're afraid that he will, even if he does not mean to. You'll be hurt when he leaves. That cannot be avoided."

\_When he leaves?\_ "He can't go!" she cried. "They've just got here. And Toothless needs time to heal." Nearly frantic, she turned to Fergusâ€”he would understand.

"They're welcome to bide here until he's well enough," he assured her. "But, Merida love, he's sure to want to go back to his own place."

Her heart sunk. Not once had she thought about this, about him leaving; she'd been so eager to get home, so excited about seeing her family again that she hadn't considered what would happen after that. Of course he'd have to leave. His family, his friends, his life was back in Berk. There was nothing for him here. She slumped in her seat, feeling sick with her stupidity, and sadder than she had any right to be, surrounded by her family. And he'd known. All the times in the past few days that she'd turned back to urge him on and seen his face, thoughtful and drawn, she'd assumed he'd been worrying about Toothless, and probably he had been; but maybe he was less anxious to arrive than her because he knew that the sooner they reached DunBroch, the sooner they'd have to say goodbye. Even if he only thought of her as a friend, you were allowed to be sad when you left your friends.

When she lay in bed that night, unable to sleep, her thoughts were about him. She tried to consider him objectively. He wasn't like any of the boys she knew. Then again, the boys she knew mostly consisted of her brothers, some of the lads who worked around the castle, and the young lords. They weren't really all that bad when they weren't showing off, she'd admit, but he was different. He was humble and kind and clever. He did what was right without concern for his own safety. He was determined, skilled, and strongâ€”maybe he wasn't as big as her dad or his, but he wasn't weak, physically or mentally. Her hands flexed at the memory of holding his. There was that, too: he was rather handsome, she finally admitted to herself. She remembered the light on his face as he lay on the deck of the ship, the wind through his hair as they rode Toothless, the flash in his

eyes as he worked on a difficult problem. Her heart fluttered when he smiled at her, her breath caught when he touched so much as her hand.

Merida wouldn't pretend anymore that she thought of him only in friendly terms. She was well past that point by now. She'd never imagined feeling like this about anyone; her parents loved each other, but they hadn't necessarily done so before they married, and she hadn't thought there would be anyone she ever loved the way her father loved her mother. She knew she was lucky to have the opportunity to marry for love, but she hadn't realized it would feel like this, if this even was love and not just infatuation. What if he stayed and she figured out later that he wasn't the right one? What if the opposite was true and he left her there and her heart remained broken forever? The chieftains wouldn't let her stay unmarried if she chose wrong, so what would be the worst part: being stuck with one of the young lords, or knowing that her first choice, if he even was that, didn't return her feelings? And was she crying now? She wiped her face angrily and turned over, burying her head in her pillow and willing herself to sleep. Eventually the sounds of the castle lulled her into a sleep too deep for dreams.

#### 14. Chapter 14

In the morning she woke determined. She wouldn't waste her time in moping while he was still there; she'd enjoy every moment with him she could. But then her mother cornered her and dragged her back into her duties: studying, sewing, supervising the household. The last item was most pressing today, since the next evening there would be a feast to celebrate her return. That made the organizing more enjoyable; Merida got to pick her favorite foods for the meal, and then spent time with her mum and a seamstress to find the best gown to wear. The only disadvantage was that she didn't see Hiccup until dinner that night, and then she was too tired to spend much time with him. The knuckles across his left hand were red for some reason, but he seemed more at ease, and for that she was thankful.

Preparations for the feast were well underway by the time she went down to breakfast the next morning. She sat out of the way with Elinor and the boys and ate her porridge as around them servants mopped and swept and moved things. Hiccup joined them, watching the proceedings and asking what was happening. She gave him breakfast, and before she could try to answer, Elinor turned to her.

"How would you say 'feast'?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. That's not exactly the kind of thing that came up."

Elinor thought for a moment. "Well, how do you say 'eat'?"

"Erm—eta, I think," she said, aware of Hiccup watching them with interest.

"And 'great,' 'large,' 'all-encompassing'?"

She laughed. "I don't know about all that, but big is mikill."

Her mum turned back to Hiccup and spread her arms, gesturing to the whole castle, as she said, "\_Mikill eta\_." Then she dropped one hand on Merida's shoulder, to show the reason why. He nodded in understanding and smiled.

When he'd finished eating Elinor looked at the two of them consideringly. Then she pointed toward the door and ordered, "Out. I don't want anyone getting in the way of the preparations." Her mum's eyes twinkled just for a moment; Merida grinned at her and then grabbed Hiccup's hand to pull him from the hall.

They went straight to where Angus stood chewing absently. Toothless watched with interest as she saddled the horse and swung up. She held her hand out to Hiccup; he looked doubtful, staring up at her and saying something hesitant, despite the fact that he rode Toothless all the time, and that was in the sky, so riding Angus should be no problem. Merida rolled her eyes and wiggled her hand impatiently, and as she knew he would, he caved and took it, pulling himself up behind her. He rested his hands on his knees and she rolled her eyes again. He'd learn soon enough, she thought, directing Angus to the gate. He took off at a gallop and Hiccup threw his arms around her.

She'd missed this. They galloped and jumped and dodged just like always—the extra rider made little difference to Angus. She let him run without thinking, following the well-worn paths they'd spent so much time on together. Oh, she was glad to be back, glad to be riding Angus again. This was right. This was home.

And yet the forest felt changed, somehow. Perhaps it was because it wasn't just Angus and her this time. Now there was Hiccup, letting his grip on her ease as Angus slowed to a trot. This was the least harrowing time they'd spent in the woods together; it was certainly the first time she wouldn't be rushing toward home. Behind her he leaned back, tipping his head up into the sun. Apparently he misjudged his balance, though, because he spun his arms and leaned forward again. She laughed quietly as he replaced his hands where they'd been earlier, making some excuse. She turned her head to smirk back at him, catching the smile he wore as well before turning back. And because Angus wouldn't tell on her, she dropped her hand over Hiccup's for just a moment.

\* \* \*

><p>If there weren't the feast to go back for, she would have stayed all day. It was nice being with Hiccup, who wouldn't demand anything of her, not even that she talk. But eventually they had to head back, though she didn't hurry Angus along at all.<p>

She was barely off the horse's back when Janet rushed up. As Hiccup slid down awkwardly the serving woman scolded them. "Your Highness, where have you been? You need to prepare for the feast and you're out riding? Come along, princess." She turned to Hiccup and shook her finger at him menacingly. "You run along, boy. Get yourself cleaned up." He looked shocked and Merida laughed as Janet dragged her away.

She barely had time to snag a handful of buns from the kitchen as Janet shooed her on. She shoved one bun in her mouth as they carried on upstairs to her room, where once again the tub was filled with water. If she'd hoped to bathe in peace, she had another thing

coming; Janet snatched the buns away and bullied her into the scented water, ducking her head under and giving her a good scrubbing. When Janet judged her sufficiently clean Merida was able to finish her lunch while she sat in front of the fire wrapped in a towel and letting her hair dry.

Then she was dressed, in a fine snowy linen shift with a dark blue dress on top, golden embroidery around its cuffs, neckline, and hem. Janet combed and brushed her hair until it shone, then arranged it so it cascaded down her back, secured with a golden circlet. When Janet held up the mirror, Merida almost didn't recognize herself; she looked older, more beautiful than she rememberedâ€”more like the girl in the picture he'd drawn.

"You look lovely," Elinor said softly from the doorway.

"Thank you." Janet slipped out as her mum entered.

"Look at you. My wee girl, all grown up. You look like a queen already." Her expression was tender as she stood next to Merida, gently stroking her hair. Merida wrapped her arms around her mother's waist, pressing her face into her stomach, hoping neither of them started crying.

"I love you, Mum."

"And I love you. Now come on. We'll see if your father's managed to make the boys presentable yet."

Apart from their hair, they were in fact ready. They trooped down to the stand outside the great hall; the doors opened and Elinor and Fergus entered, followed by the triplets all in a row, proud as little peacocks. Then she stepped into the doorway and the crowd cheered as she walked forward. Up at the head table Hiccup stared, an amazed smile on his face, and she fought not to grin at him. When she took her place next to her father, he motioned for the people to quiet down.

"Welcome! We're all here to celebrate the safe return of Merida, our princess. And to thank the peopleâ€”er, person and dragonâ€”who helped her get back to DunBroch: Hiccup and Toothless. Without them, who knows where she'd be. So we thank them, and ask that you make them feel welcome here. This is a happy day for all of us, having our beloved girl back again, and I hope you enjoy the feast. But first, let's drink to Merida!" They all cheered and drank, and she grinned.

The food was lovely, all the things she'd missed most when the kidnappers had thrown her stale bread, and everyone seemed genuinely happy. Of course, there was plenty of ale, which probably helped. Merida ate until she was just short of stuffed. Then the people moved the chairs and tables, clearing the floor for dancing, and her dad rose and escorted her mum to the middle of the floor. They danced more or less gracefully to a slow air; when it was done Fergus brought Elinor back to the table and then grabbed her hand, bellowing, "Come on, girl, let's show 'em how it's done!"

Neither she nor her dad were particularly skilled dancers, but they had fun together, stomping and roaring with laughter. At the end people cheered, and Merida called above the noise, "Everyone, please,

join us!" People surged forward; someone grabbed her hands and she danced with whoever claimed her, dance after dance. Only when she was growing thirsty and dizzy did she beg off, excusing herself from the floor to drop into the empty seat next to Hiccup. She waved a hand in front of her face, trying to cool off.

"This is fantastic, Mum, thank you." She reached out for the nearest cup, which she suspected was Hiccup's, and took a sip.

For once Elinor ignored her atrocious manners. "You're welcome, dear."

Merida looked at Hiccup. He was wearing a kilt again; he could pass for a subject of the kingdom. His cheeks were pink from the heat in the hall, though surely not nearly as pink as hers. He watched the dancers go through their sets, and she jerked her head toward them. They could manage a dance together, she thought.

"Merida," her mother scolded. She paid no mind, instead taking Hiccup's hand and pointing at the dance floor. He glanced from their hands up to her eyes, then gestured at his leg. She rolled her eyes, unsurprised that he tried to use that as an excuse, as if she hadn't seen him move just fine with it. She pointed at where her father was dancing among his people. Hiccup twirled his finger around and shrugged before indicating that he would fall down in the middle of the dance and humiliate himself; she stared back and tugged on his hand. Finally he relented with a sigh and a shrug and she stood, pulling him up and into the crowd.

"If you please," she called, "something a bit slower. Tom, Catriona, could you join us?" She turned to Hiccup and squeezed his hand one last time before releasing it, gesturing from his eyes to her. He nodded and they moved into place. It was not an elegant dance, at least not as they performed it; poor Catriona suffered some kicks and stumbles in the process. But Merida didn't mind. He let her lead him through the unfamiliar steps and she smiled, feeling a quiet content combined with a thrill of pleasure every time their eyes met, whenever their hands touched. It was over too soon and she curtseyed to Tom and Catriona, murmuring thanks above the polite applause.

Hiccup took her hand, holding it high as they walked back to their seats. Pride swelled inside her as he sat next to her, pride in him mixed with humility at the idea that he thought she was worth the honor he afforded her. People came up to greet and congratulate her, and a few of them looked over Hiccup with open curiosity. His eyes dropped as another well-wisher looked him over, and he tried to scoot his chair away to give her some space. That was the last thing she wanted from him, so she put her hand on his arm to stop him from moving, and then slid it down to his hand, pressing her palm against his. He threaded his fingers through hers, suppressing a smile.

Her rest didn't last long before her mother stood in front of her, hands on her hips. "Up you get, Merida," she commanded. Hiccup dropped her hand guiltily and she stood, brow furrowed. "Harris, Hubert, Hamish," Elinor called, and added, looking around, "and Laura, please." She led them all to the floor and arranged them in two lines, the women facing the boys; then she grinned when the music started and she moved forward, catching Harris' hand. Merida laughed as Hubert whirled her through the first move; after that there was no

way to tell them apart, so the women were entirely reliant on the triplets, and they spun and turned at breakneck speed. Never once did the boys let them collide, though there were a few close calls. It was wild and joyous and exciting, easily her second favorite dance of the night.

Soon after that everyone tired of dancing, or realized how dangerous it truly was, and a man from one of the crofts sang "The Mist Covered Mountains." Then someone called for the story of the Princess and the Bear Queen, and Merida walked to the open space in front of the head table to tell it. She hadn't told it for a while, and she worried that she might leave something out, especially since the audience already knew it, but they listened raptly.

At the end, Elinor stood. "If you will grant us leave, there are sleepy cubs here that need to go to bed. Thank you all for coming." Fergus carried the boys up the stairs, and the hall started to empty.

Merida stood by the door, wishing people a good night as they filed out; when the last guests were gone, a few valiant servants were trying to clear away the cups. "Oh, leave them," she urged, smiling at the tired servants. "They'll still be there in the morning. Go and sleep. And thank you."

Finally the big room was empty of everyone but her and Hiccup. She stood in the middle of the room, her arms wrapped around herself, replaying what it had been like to dance with him in front of everyone, to hold his hand while people spoke to her. He walked up beside her and she wished she had the words to confess everything to him. Better not to, though; then she could remember this night as a time when he was with her and she was happy. He stared at her, biting his lip, and all she wanted to do was touch him. His head turned, tracking her as she walked behind him and hopped onto his back, giggling as he staggered with the unexpected weight. She'd no doubt in her mind that he could carry her up the stairs and anywhere else she wanted to go. She leaned her cheek against his head, indulging in a shiver at his arms wrapped around her legs. At her door he dropped her without warning, and she wrinkled her nose at him to register her disapproval. She said goodnight, covering a yawn with one hand; he took her other hand in both of his and kissed it, bowing low, and her heart melted. "Oh, Hiccup," she murmured, helplessly, adoringly, as he looked up at her. Closing the door felt like the hardest thing she'd ever had to do.

## 15. Chapter 15

In the morning she raced down the stairs, heart skittering with the thought of seeing him again. She'd doubted it before, but now how he felt was perfectly obvious. Unfortunately, he was nowhere to be seen. "Where's Mum?" she asked, sitting at the table. "And Hiccup?"

"Your mother's spirited him off somewhere. She looked like a hound on the scent." Merida tried to hide her disappointment as he said with a grin, "Looks like you're stuck with me for the time being."

The good thing about Elinor being elsewhere was that they could have sword practice in the yard without any disagreement. She took a few swings to warm up. It'd been weeks since the last time she'd held a



sword; that didn't mean Fergus would go easy on her, though. As they sparred, he asked questions about her kidnappers: what they'd looked and sounded like, what their plans had been, if they'd made any mention of where they were from. As their swords clashed she told him all she could, which wasn't much at all.

"Where are they now?"

"The ones who survived the dragons' visit to the camp were taken to a deserted island to the north of Berk. They were left with bread, water, and a single knife. I'd be surprised if they weren't still there."

"That was a good decision." He nodded his approval. "This Stoick sounds like a good leader. Strong."

"He is. At least, he seems to be. He's certainly a good man." She surged forward in an attack that he easily defended against, pushing her away.

"And Hiccup is his only child?"

She nodded. "But the chieftain is elected by the people. So Hiccup won't necessarily be chosen." Merida twirled away from a downward strike, leaving Fergus' sword crashing against the flagstones. "He would be if they were smart, though. He's the best of all of them." She dropped the sword point and leaned her weight on the weapon, breathing hard. It was horrible and selfish, but she hoped that they wouldn't choose him. Their loss could be her gain.

He wiped sweat from his forehead and regarded her. "He must be, if you like him so much."

"Please, Dad, I don't want to talk about it." She hefted the sword again. "Ready?"

He grinned and lifted his sword easily. "The question is, are you?"

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><p>That question kept repeating in her head for the rest of the morning, and she knew the answer was no. She still wasn't ready for any of it: talking to her parents, facing the chieftains whenever they arrived, choosing a husband. She wished she could stay outside all day, hitting things and avoiding her responsibilities, but she trailed after her dad when he went in for lunch. She poked at her food, her mood growing worse the more time she had to think.<p>

She looked up when her mum and Hiccup came in, arms full of books and giddy expressions on their faces. "Where have you been?" she asked grumpily, shoving a piece of bread into her mouth. Hiccup grinned and Elinor nudged him with her elbow; he cleared his throat, looked right at her, and said carefully, "Hello, Merida. How are you?"

"What?" Her mouth dropped open and Elinor scolded her, so she swallowed and wiped her mouth before repeating, "What?"

"How are you?" he asked again, though with markedly less confidence than the first time.

She responded more automatically this time. "I'm fine, thank you. How are you?" She glanced curiously at the books Elinor had set on the table and the ones still in his hands.

"I'm fine."

Merida rounded on her mother. "What's going on? How can he talk all of a sudden? How did you teach him all that?"

"I remembered last night that there are some old books in one of the storerooms. We found a dictionary." She looked pleased as she took her seat at the table.

Merida turned her attention back to Hiccup and cocked her head. "Are you hungry?"

He thought for a moment, eyes focused far away, lips moving slightly, and eventually said, "Yes?" \_Yes\_. She never thought such a short answer to a mundane question would be so exciting. She took the books from his hands and stacked them on the table, then led him to the chair next to hers. He sat and she picked up a plate, loading it with cold meat and bread. When it was full she put it in front of him and kissed his cheek soundly. The boys made kissy noises as she took her seat and returned to her meal, suddenly feeling more cheerful and even more nervous at the same time.

Elinor escorted the boys to their lessons when they'd finished eating, and Hiccup pulled the dictionary over to him and paged through it. To Fergus he said, "I'm sorry for the delay when we came back. Thank you for letting me and Toothless stay here."

"Thank \_you\_," he replied. He stood and patted Hiccup's shoulder, smiling, before he left.

Then they were alone with the means to communicate. Merida wasn't sure what she wanted to say first—"Thank you for bringing me home"? No, too impersonal, and her dad had just said that. "Please don't go"? Too soon and too desperate, probably. As she turned pages a word caught her eye and she brightened, flipping through to find the rest of a phrase. After a moment she said, "I am happy with you." That was true, and a good start.

He took a quick breath and leaned over the book. "With me?" he asked doubtfully. Like he didn't believe it. Like maybe she'd said the wrong words. That was a possibility, she supposed, but she knew how she could make her point clearer.

"With you," she said again, reaching out to touch his face, raise it from the book to her. She cupped his jaw and stroked her thumb over his cheek, licking her lips. His expression went from dumbfounded to almost hungry and he leaned forward with excruciating slowness, pausing just before their lips met. Her heart was tripping over itself at being close enough to count his freckles, feel his breath against her skin. Then, just as he closed his eyes, there were footsteps coming down the stairs—her mother. Of course. Merida's hand fell away and Hiccup's head dropped to the table. "Thank you, Mum," she muttered sullenly at Elinor's raised eyebrow.

\* \* \*

><p>She knew that they were being watched. They didn't even try to disguise it; there was just always someone around, watching if not listening, clearing their throat if he leaned too close to her while tracing a word in the dictionary, offering completely unnecessary assistance if she didn't drop his hand soon enough when he helped her down from Angus' back. It was maddening. It had to stop.<p>

"This is ridiculous." As soon as her parents appeared in the great hall, where she'd been waiting for them, she jumped up. "\_Please\_ tell everyone to stop following us around all the time."

"Who's following you around, dear?"

"Mu-um! It's not like it isn't obvious. What do you think we're going to do, anyway?" Fergus looked absolutely stricken and Elinor frowned, and Merida had an idea of the worst possible thing they could be thinking. She took a step back, her face flushing violently. Her parents sat down, Dad looking weary and Mum maintaining her composure, which was not the good sign it could have been.

"Merida. When you disappeared we had to contact the other chieftains, to see if they could help find you. As you might imagine, they were not pleased at hearing you were gone." She held up her hand as Merida started to protest. "I know it wasn't your fault—it was no one's fault. But this incident has only strengthened their belief that you need to choose a husband soon."

It wasn't totally unexpected, but she was taken aback all the same. "I'm still not ready!"

"They won't like to hear it. You know that it was a miracle they agreed to let you choose for yourself in the first place."

"I know," she said miserably.

"When they arrive, which could be as soon as tomorrow, they'll push for an answer. Weâ€\_you\_â€need to be prepared for that."

"Butâ€|" Oh, what could she even say? There was no other way nowâ€she would have to admit it all and deal with the consequences. "What if I have chosen, and they don't agree to respect my choice?"

When she looked up her mother looked more sympathetic than she'd imagined she would. "They may not. And their reservations would be legitimate, don't you agree?"

"Do \_you\_ agree?"

"This has become far more complicated than I ever dreamed," Elinor admitted. "I thought you'd eventually decide that you could deal with one of the heirs and choose from them. I never expected all of this."

Fergus shifted, sitting up. "Speaking as your father, there is no doubt that he has very good qualities, chief among them that he would do anything for you." She blushed again and bit her lip so as not to smile. "But as the king, I can't force the clan chieftains to accept him. As rulers, sometimes our own desires have to be sacrificed for

the good of the kingdom."

"Yes, Dad," she said. "But don't you, both of you, think that he could be good for the kingdom?"

"Merida, we've only known him a few days. You've only known him a few weeks." Mum shrugged, as near to helpless as Merida had ever seen her. "It's possible, I suppose."

"But we're not the ones you need to convince."

She paced back and forth in front of her parents. "So if I do convince the chieftains to accept him, you will too?"

They exchanged looks, and nodded.

"Are you sure about this, him?"

"I'm more sure about him than I am about any of the others."

"Best not to put it quite like that when the lords arrive."

"And does he feel the same?"

"Yes." She paused, and had to add, "I think."

"You need to know. This is not just your future, it's the future of the entire kingdom. You can't gamble on how he might feel."

"Iâ€" She was saved from having to answer by the young man in question walking into the hall. He waved wanly, saying hello as he crossed to the stairs; his hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat and his cheeks were pink with exertion. Fergus lumbered up from his seat and stumped across the room, picking up the dictionary as he went and motioning for Hiccup to follow.

Merida and Elinor watched them head up the stairs. "Talk to me, lass," her mum said gently. "I do want to help."

She sat heavily at Elinor's feet and rested her head on her knee. "I want to do the right thing for the kingdom, really, but I want to be happy, too. I never thought anyone would make me as happy as he does. And when I think of a life without him, it's no kind of life at all." Her mother ran her fingers through Merida's curls as she spoke. "I know I hardly know him, but I already know him better than any of the other lads. And I believe he's the best choice, not just for me, but for all of DunBroch. But I don't want to be wrong, and I don't even know if he l-likes me enough to want to stay here instead of going back to Berk and his life there."

She sobbed then, great wracking heaves and tears, and her mother whispered soothing nonsense. When she'd cried all the tears out, Elinor turned Merida's face up and wiped the wetness away. "You are my strong daughter, my bonny girl. If he is what you want, I've no doubt you will find a way to win him." She gave Merida a shrewd smile. "My love, you are the firstborn of your house, and so is he."

She glanced up when he came down the stairs, still mildly embarrassed from whatever her dad had said and carrying the book under one arm. "Hi," he said, sitting down and not looking at her. She heard him kick his heels against the legs of the chair and tried to think of what to say. It was worse than before; if she tried to repeat what she'd told her mum she'd only start crying again. So she waited until haltingly, with many turns of the page, he spoke. She dropped her head on his shoulder as he did, helping him with pronunciation here and there.

"I will do whatever you ask. I would swim to Berk, and fight a bear, and dance all night—whatever you want. If you want me to stay, I'll stay. If you want me to go, I'll go, but my heart won't. If you think the best thing for DunBroch would be to marry one of the chieftains' sons, you should—"

He turned to face her then and saw the tears. He murmured gently, telling her not to cry, wiping her face, even smiling a little. She felt her expression start to crumble again, and he put his arms around her and pulled her to him. She closed her eyes, breathing in the smell of him and feeling him nuzzle her hair. He said something, sounding too resigned for her taste, and she pulled back, looking at him at arm's length.

"I am happy with you," she said again firmly, to dispel any doubts he might have. "I—" She had to flip through the book then to work it out. "I would sooner have you than any other. But I'm not ready, and the clans—" She wasn't ready to make changes and demands. She trailed off helplessly, and he slumped.

Was it really hopeless? Should they just give up? No. They were neither of them quitters; he was determined and she was pigheaded and there had to be a way. And until she discovered it, there was no reason for them not to take advantage of the empty room. He looked up in surprise when she slid her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck, murmuring his name, but that was all the encouragement he needed. She grinned as he brushed his lips against hers, sweetly, and she pulled him near, tilting her head and pressing closer and laying her hand over his racing heart. He looked slightly dazed but happy when they broke apart and she sagged against him, his chin on the top of her head. "I will fight for you," she promised quietly. "I will find a way."

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><p>The wardrobe creaked as it opened, and Merida rolled over to see Janet taking a dress out. "What's going on?" she asked sleepily.<p>

Janet curtsied. "Good morning, Your Highness. The chieftains are expected sometime today, and Queen Elinor asked me to check that you had a suitable dress ready." She displayed the one in her hands. "Is this one all right?"

Merida didn't care at all, but she had to make an effort. "It's fine, thank you, Janet," she said, hopping out of bed and grabbing an everyday dress. "Do you know where the queen is?"

"She was in the kitchens last I saw her."

"Thank you," she said again, pulling the dress over her head and hurrying downstairs. Her mother was still in the kitchens, supervising the menu for the evening. Merida waited until she turned and noticed her before she spoke. "Do you need any help?"

Elinor smiled slightly. "No, thank you, Merida."

"May I go for a ride, then? I'll be back by lunchtime."

Her mother searched her face for a minute. "Yes, you may. But be careful, please."

"Yes, Mum. Thank you." She flung her arms around Elinor before rushing out to saddle Angus.

They rode hard for the stone circle. Merida walked around its perimeter to sit with her back against one of the stones, staring off into the distance. Before she would have been looking for the wisps, waiting for them to lead her to a witch who would help her change her fate. Now she knew better: if anyone was going to change things, it would have to be her. She just had to come up with a plan.

If they all knew Hiccup the way she did, she knew they'd agree to accept him. But there was no easy way to introduce him so that they quickly understood all of his good qualities—it had taken her long days and dangerous situations to see them all. She didn't think the chieftains would all agree to go out into the woods for days, waiting to witness Hiccup's good nature.

They'd agreed to let their children find love in their own time. It was understandable that they would get impatient, but she hoped they hadn't changed their minds about letting her choose. Of course they'd all wanted their own sons to marry into the royal family, for the glory it would bring to their clans, and they'd expected that her future husband would be one of them, a Highlander, not a stranger. But many unexpected things had happened between then and now; surely they wouldn't demand that she abide by what they expected.

She sighed. They'd be well within their rights to fight her. And she could only justify fighting back so far—she couldn't afford to alienate the clan chieftains, as much as she wanted stubbornly to dig her heels in and refuse to compromise. She hoped that they'd understand when they met him, that they'd remember their promise, that their sons would take her part again, that they'd be able to put aside their ambitions and respect her choice.

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><p>When she returned she washed her face and changed into the dress Janet had picked that morning, then sat with her family, kicking her heels and waiting for the clans to show up. For a moment she wondered if she should have found Hiccup and waited with him; if he knew that the chieftains were on their way, he was probably worrying, thinking too much. But she needed a clear head to deal with what was to come, and she wouldn't have a clear head if she sat with him.<p>

He was already there in the great hall when her family entered, dressed in his own clothes, his harness on and Toothless saddled next to him. He looked handsome and strong and he smiled to reassure her,

but she couldn't manage a smile in return. Bagpipe music filled the hall as the doors opened and the chieftains led their men in.

Fergus stood. "Welcome, my lords. It is an honor to see you all again, and especially on such a joyous occasion as the return of our princess." The clansmen cheered rowdily, though Merida felt unaffected by the acclaim. When they'd calmed down somewhat, Fergus went on. "To shorten the story, the princess escaped from her captors through her own power." She'd all but demanded they acknowledge that; as much as she owed to Hiccup, Toothless, and the rest of Berk, she'd gotten herself out first, and she wanted to remind the lords of her strength. "and then was helped in her return to DunBroch by Hiccup of Berk and Toothless the dragon." He gestured and the two stepped forward to stand between the thrones and the crowd.

Their reaction was gratifying. Every warrior's hand went to his weapon, and they gasped. Toothless was acting more like a wild beast than she'd ever seen him as he pushed at Hiccup's back; he must have looked properly terrifying to them as Hiccup gave him a low command. Young Macintosh's expression was one of fear, while Young MacGuffin looked Hiccup up and down and Wee Dingwall stared with rare focus at Toothless.

"Hiccup is the son of the chieftain of the village of Berk, far to the north. He was the first to train a dragon there. He and Toothless have traveled far from their home and risked their lives to protect the princess, with no expectation of reward. They are our guests, and deserve all of our respect, honor, and thanks for helping to bring Merida home. Thank you, Hiccup." At that they both turned to the thrones and bowed; it was more of a show of Toothless' intelligence than anything else, but it couldn't fail to earn them some respect. Hiccup glanced up at her and winked, and it startled a smile out of her. She didn't care that everyone was watching; she put her hand over her heart, all but pledging herself to him then and there.

Lord MacGuffin asked, "Your Highness, what happened? How were you taken, and how did you escape?"

She stood and told a short version of the story, from being taken to the storm to Hiccup and Toothless finding her and the journey back. She tried not to overstate all that they'd done for her; the plain truth was endorsement enough of Hiccup's strengths. And Toothless', as she recounted the fight with the bear. The gathered men's eyes darted from the dragon to the tapestry on the wall over her head; many of them had been there for the original incident, and they knew how serious and dangerous such a fight was.

"Welcome back, Your Highness," said Lord Dingwall when she'd finished. "We're all glad you've made it home safely. But this situation"

"Has only made it more imperative that you have a strong husband to protect you," put in Lord Macintosh. \_Do not roll your eyes,\_ she ordered herself.

"If her father couldn't protect her, what makes you think one of your boys could?" her dad asked. Merida thought it was a good question, but it sent the lords into hysterics, shouting over each other about their sons' accomplishments. Elinor tried briefly to pacify them, but then gave in and let them yell. Perhaps they'd shout themselves

hoarse, and then more reasonable voices could be heard.

A tapping noise caught her attention and she looked over to where Hiccup sat. He gave her a half smile, trying to distract her from the arguing going on all around them. She wrinkled her nose at him, glad of the respite, even as she envied his inability to understand the lords.

\* \* \*

><p>Fergus managed to keep the lords from trying to resume the discussion after dinner, mostly by plying them with drink. Merida slipped away as soon as she could, though Hiccup and Toothless were under too much scrutiny to escape the warriors, who were studying them with interest: the metal leg, the saddle, the red tail fin, all of it so foreign and intriguing and, hopefully, impressive.<p>

In the morning it started up again, though at first only with the chieftains and her dad. She'd been planning to find Hiccup, go for a ride or a walk or something, but her mum had decided it was a good time to review some of her studies. This time, though, Elinor provided an added twist: she brought the dictionary and had Merida study the words that went along with the subject. She looked at her mother, for the first time seeing how clever the woman really was. She'd always known her mum had a better way with words than Fergus had, but this was more than just eloquence and tact.

"What?" Elinor asked when she caught Merida staring. Her hands went to her face. "I haven't got ink on myself, have I?"

She shook her head. "No, Mum. I was just thinking how smart you are, and how lucky we are to have you."

Elinor didn't look quite sure she believed her, but said, "I am the lucky one, my dear. Now back to your work."

## 17. Chapter 17

They descended around lunchtime, thinking to join the chieftains, only to find them neither arguing nor eating but clustered in the doorway, watching something happening in the courtyard. Merida ducked under her father's arm to see what was so interesting. A blue flame erupted over the trees and Toothless flew through it, then swooped over the castle wall and landed in the middle of the courtyard. On his back Hiccup was laughing, like he hadn't just done something fantastically dangerous. He looked down at where the young lords stood and extended his hand to Wee Dingwall, who took it.

From the doorway his father shouted, "Oi! Don't do that! You bring my son back here, you ruffian!" but they ignored him, Wee Dingwall grinning and climbing on behind Hiccup. Toothless rose, much more sedately than he'd landed, and took an easy lap around the castle; it was the most leisurely she'd seen him fly.

Once one of the heirs had gone, the others had to as wellâ€"not because they wanted to, but because not riding the dragon would have caused them dishonor. Young MacGuffin seemed worried that he was too big for Toothless, but Hiccup encouraged him, and the dragon nodded until the boy got on. Young Macintosh just seemed scared, sitting



stiffly, his grip on the straps white-knuckled.

Then the triplets demanded a turn and Hiccup wisely took them one at a time, though not before finding a length of rope and tying one end around the saddle and the other around the boy's waist. Of course for them just flying wasn't enough; they'd seen Toothless breathe fire and they wouldn't be content until he produced more. Hamish created the game of tossing a small stick for Toothless to incinerate as he hovered; the boys had never been happier.

She couldn't see their faces, but the lords seemed reluctantly impressed by the display. "First one to train a dragon, the king said he was," MacGuffin remarked. "I wonder is it anything like breaking a wild horse."

"A wild horse that can fly and spit flame, sure," Macintosh snorted.

"It seems tame enough. Maybe he raised it from a baby."

"Egg," said Dingwall.

Macintosh stared down hard at the top of his head. "What?"

"Dragons come from eggs."

"What, like a chicken?"

"Aye."

"And how do you know that?" Macintosh demanded.

Dingwall scoffed, as if outraged by their ignorance. "\_Everyone\_ knows that."

"What happened to his tail? That's what I'd like to know," MacGuffin said. "\_What happened to Hiccup's leg, more like\_."

"I can tell you that," Fergus offered. "It's a grand story. Over lunch, eh? Hubert, Hamish, Harris, come eat."

They all shuffled around to head back into the hall, and Hiccup was about to join them when Toothless shook his head, pointing with his snout at Merida, standing at the door with her arms crossed and foot tapping. Did he think he was going to take everyone else on a ride and not her? Hiccup grinned and held out his hand. That was a good enough invitation for her; she ran to Toothless and leapt on his back, hugging Hiccup snugly about the middle.

He rose over the castle walls and then shot down, swooping under the bridge. Merida felt her stomach plummet within her, a more pleasant feeling than she would have expected, and squealed, tightening her grip around Hiccup, who laughed. Toothless flew over the surface of the loch, close enough for his wings to skim the water. As they flew Merida thought back to their previous flights: when Toothless had found the kidnappers, when they'd spent hours over the sea, when they'd hopped from island to island and over the treetops. This flight, easy and calm, with the wind in her face smelling of home, was by far the best of them. She was even almost able to forget what was waiting for them back at the castle. She rested her chin on

Hiccup's shoulder and closed her eyes. No matter what happened, she'd keep this, the feeling of flying with him, forever.

\* \* \*

><p>This was it. Her father was solid next to her, a comforting presence; her mother radiated calm confidence. Her parents were there as the authorities; they would support her, if necessary, but the work was up to her. She could do this. The lords and their sons sat before them, the older men as always much more interested in what was going on than the younger ones; if Hiccup were one of them, he'd be paying attention to what was being said about his future. For a split second she wished that she were wherever he was right now, instead of here, about to fight the lords and her own stubborn nature.<p>

"Your Highness, you can appreciate how recent events have made it imperative that you decide your fate," Lord MacGuffin said.

She nodded. "I do appreciate it. And I've learned many things recently that have better prepared me for what I must do."

"Oh, aye? What have you learned?" Dingwall asked.

"About patience and forgiveness and kindness. About hidden strength, and intelligence, and sacrifice." \_About dragons\_, she thought, \_and fire, and the sea. Words: when to use them, and when you don't have to use them.\_

Predictably, they were unswayed by her personal growth. "That's grand," Macintosh said dismissively. "And it's helped you come to a decision?"

"Not so much a decision as a proposal."

Dingwall squinted. "Isn't it all the same? Your decision will be a proposal."

"Not exactly. My lords, you have shown great patience in allowing us, your children, the time to find our own way in the world. I thank you for that. In this time I've learned that there are threats outside of our kingdom, people who wish to take from us. Like you, I've realized that the bonds we have are among our most important defenses. Our strength comes from our unity. Divided, we are weakened; alone, we are vulnerable. My lords, if I chose one of your sons now, would it not cause jealousy and division among you?"

As much as they would like to deny it, it would, at least a little. Their sideways glances at each other confirmed that. They weren't really spiteful, she knew, but each had his pride to protect. "What are you suggesting?" Lord MacGuffin asked gruffly as the other lords eyed her suspiciously.

"Perhaps there might be another option." She swallowed, tried to keep her voice steady and confident. "A suitor not from any of the clans."

"And what good would that do us?" Dingwall asked. "The point of the marriage is to strengthen our alliance."

"Would you have me strengthen an alliance with one clan at the risk

of alienating the others?" She shook her head. "That would serve DunBroch ill."

"I suppose you have someone in mind." Macintosh sounded sarcastic and disgruntled, and she quailed momentarily.

But before she could respond, one of the lads spoke up. "Dad, I'm dropping out," the younger Dingwall announced, mostly to the air over his father's ear. "I don't want to marry her."

"Aye, me as well. I've no chance."

"What?" Lord MacGuffin demanded.

"They're right," Young Macintosh said. "It's obvious. As long as he's here, none of us will ever win her."

"I am right here, you know," she reminded them. They ignored her. \_If I have to marry into one of these families, I may well murder my father-in-law\_, she thought. \_See how you like your alliance then\_.

"What're you talking about? That Viking boy?"

"That's the one. The princess is in love with him."

"It wouldn't be fair to ask her to marry one of us," Wee Dingwall said. She smiled at him, and he returned it.

"Is this true?" Lord Dingwall asked, none too pleased. Merida hid a gulp. This wasn't exactly how she had planned to tell the lords, but what's done was done.

"It's true," she answered, steadily as she could, hoping she wasn't blushing.

Lord Macintosh turned to Fergus. "And you allowed this?"

Her dad shrugged. "It's not exactly something I have any control over. Besides, it had already happened by the time he returned her to us."

"Oh, that's it, then. She just feels this way because he saved her. That's gratitude, Your Highness, not love," Macintosh explained condescendingly. Merida fought to control her temper.

"I think I know the difference between them."

"You don't owe him anything for bringing you back," Dingwall said. "A hearty thank you and maybe a bit of gold, but not marriage."

"I owe him my life," she shot back, letting her temper flare. "We owe him this at least, and more besides."

"I won't deny that he seems very impressive," Lord Macintosh said, "butâ€" "

"He's a Viking. He's not one of us."

Merida took a deep breath. "My lords, you agreed that you would let

us choose our own destinies."

"Aye, but we thought one of our own would be your destiny."

"And so did I. So did we all. But things have changed. I would not even suggest such a changeâ€"such a break with tradition if I didn't believe that he was the best choice for me, and a good choice for the kingdom."

"We know nothing about him!" Macintosh protested.

"We know he was the first of his people to train a dragon, even designing the saddle and mechanism to help him fly again," Wee Dingwall said.

"And that he brought the princess back home safely," Young Macintosh added. His father glared at him.

"And that he lost his foot battling against the giant dragon who was threatening his people, and that the dragon Toothless saved his life then," said Young MacGuffin. At least, that's what it seemed like he said.

The support of the young lords buoyed her confidence. If their fathers wanted to know about Hiccup, she was more than willing to tell them.

"He's the firstborn son of a chieftain," she pointed out. "And he's more than proved his worth, in strength and in intelligence. If you like, he'll do it again." She grinned suddenly, wild and fierce, her blood pulsing quicker. "But remember, the princess gets to pick the challenge."

\* \* \*

><p>It took just a little more convincingâ€"surely, she suggested mildly, they saw the wisdom in not pushing the future queen into doing something she didn't want to doâ€"before the lords agreed to consider Hiccup as a suitor of equal rank. And when Lord Macintosh put forward a proposal that she be allowed time alone, without the influence of any of the suitors, to consider her choice, she agreed readily, and not just because it showed her open to compromise. Even though the glint in Macintosh's eye made it clear that she wouldn't really be left alone, it was a sensible idea: the lords would feel they were all on an equal footing (even as they bent the rules to their best advantage), she would be able to see if there was more than just infatuation between the two of them, and Hiccup would have time to decide what he wanted to doâ€"if she was worth giving up his life in Berk for.<p>

It would give her time to accept the possibility that he might not return, whether by choice or by chance, and time to prepare to become someone's wife. Heaven knew she would need the whole year for that. That had been Elinor's contribution; when Lord MacGuffin had asked how long they were to wait, she had said "A year and a day" like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Though they'd frowned, none of the chieftains had protested. Then Mum had written the compact, draft after draft in her flowing hand as the lords talked over each other, until finally she read out a version they all agreed on, and each of the four leaders put his name down, formally agreeing. That

done, Elinor had gone through the laborious task of translating it so Hiccup would understand, producing both a copy in runes and a phonetic version for Fergus to proclaim.

He peeked in just as the servants had cleared lunch. "Hiccup," her mum called before he could withdraw, and he walked in, hair damp and pants speckled with something green; he must have been at the loch with the boys. He took in the papers and the dictionary curiously, then looked at Fergus as he read. Merida watched his face tense; at the end he nodded, looking from the lords to her parents, gauging their reactions, and finally to her.

There was wariness in his expression, like he worried about what she thought of all of this, and she smiled, slow and proud. The year would pass all too slowly as she waited; without him there it would drag on like the longest winter, like the last week before a birthday when you knew there were sweets and presents waiting and so every minute seemed like an hour. This would be worse. But there would be plenty to fill the time—her mother would see to that, give her things to learn and practice during the long days, and at night she would have time to remember what she was working for, what she was looking forward to. Whatever the year brought she would face it, meet it, fight it, overcome it; no challenge would best her, not when he was the goal. And as she met his eyes, saw the crooked quirk of his mouth, the tilt of his head, she knew that the reward would be worth a year, ten years, a hundred. A year and a day didn't last forever, but what came at the end of it would.

End  
file.